FEBRUARY 2025

CHOICE

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229 *products* TESTED

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Toasters
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Pet monitors
Barbecues
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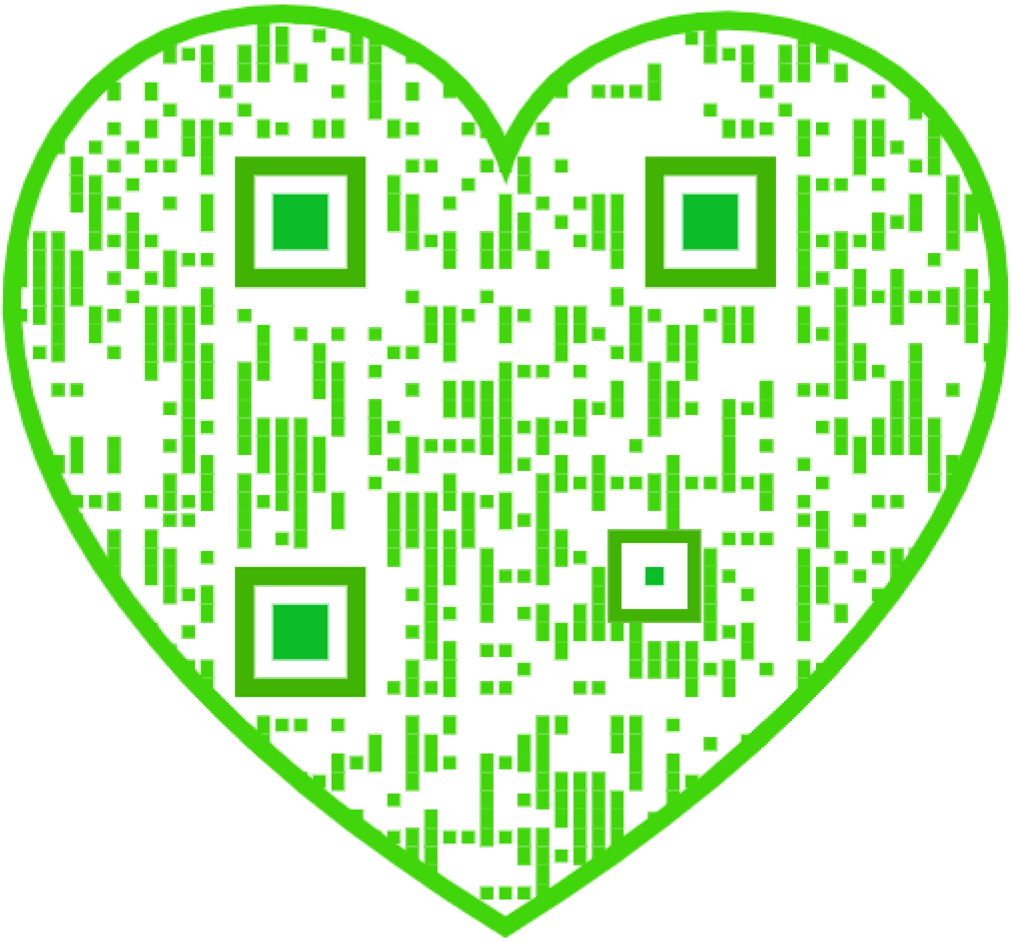
& more

KEYBOARD WARRIORS

Back-to-school tech

Plus Grocery prices, car insurance, Ask the Expert & more



A New Year's resolution

How do you make these things stick?

Welcome to 2025. New year, new me, am I right?

Actually, if history serves, I'm probably not right. New Year's resolutions and new beginnings almost always devolve into "same old story" within months (or sometimes even weeks).

I should know: when it comes to New Year's resolutions and self-improvement, I'm as big a sucker as anyone.

When it comes to New Year's resolutions and self-improvement, I'm as big a sucker as anyone

I'm always writing lists, packed full of silly little goals. I'm also a huge spreadsheet fan, adding a menagerie of daily tasks and boxes to tick. "Drink 3 litres of water", "hit 10,000 steps", "do some yoga", "meditate", that sort of thing. Sometimes it sticks, but usually it falls by the wayside after a month or so.

I once found a dusty old wallet inside an abandoned cupboard in a dark corner of my bedroom. Next to the expired credit cards and old driver's licences was a filthy, folded-up piece of paper: a five-year plan I'd scribbled together around a decade earlier. I can't remember exactly what was on that list but it was a fun mix of stuff that was hilariously stupid in hindsight, and – thankfully – a few things I'd actually achieved in the decade since.

Sometimes resolutions pay off.

But in my many years of delving into self-improvement, I've found a few things that seem to work.

Top of the list is habits. Instead of creating big, scary, impossible goals for yourself, it's usually more effective to identify the habits that can get you there, and the ones that hold you back. If you can somehow replace bad habits with good habits, you're on your way.

I've also found that if you try to change too many of those habits at once, you're more likely to fail. One or two habits at a time is plenty. And then once those habits are established, move on to the next ones.

Another important thing I've learned: willpower is finite and you can't rely on it.

If a newly established habit becomes integral to my everyday existence, I'm more likely to do it. If it's a conscious act I have to will myself into, I'll probably give up at some point.

I think about the quote in author James Clear's *Atomic Habits* all the time: "You don't rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems."

And that, folks, is why I eat a gigantic bowl of sugary cereal every time I watch TV after putting the kids to sleep! My systems are hot garbage. Hopefully yours are more effective.

Have a great 2025 and good luck with all your resolutions!

Mark Serrels
CHOICE Editorial Director
Email: mserrels@choice.com.au

CHOICE

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Wherever possible, we pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising or freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by membership. Membership includes access to services such as CHOICE Help and the Voice Your Choice research program. Our product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. We also research a wide range of consumer services, reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate their quality and claims.

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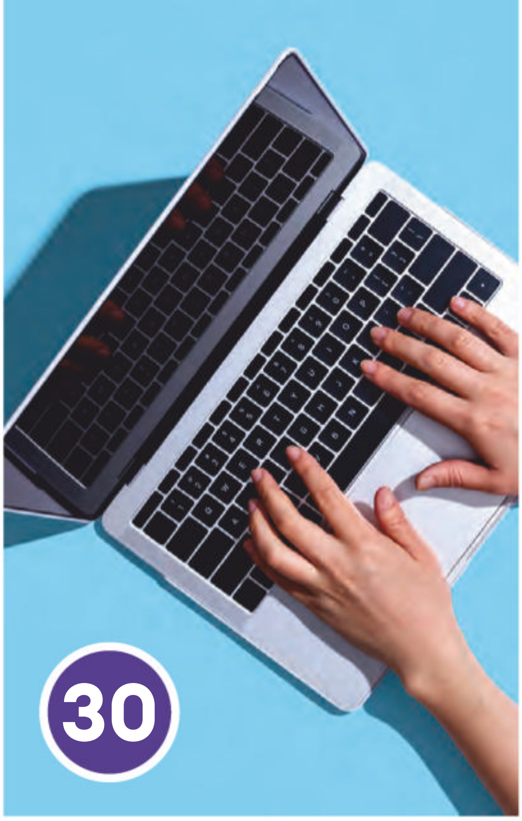

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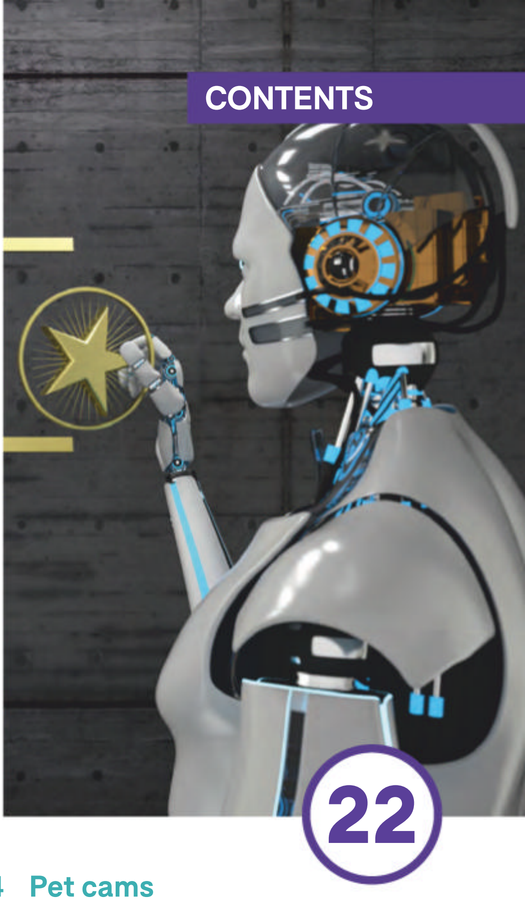

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HOT LOOKS P44

CHOICE magazine provides a selection of our top product reviews. We can't always include all the models we've tested, but you'll always find the products that scored the best. To view complete results for all our tests, go to **choice.com.au**, or call Customer Service on **1800 069 552** to add full online access to your membership package.

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CHECKOUT

The latest consumer news in brief

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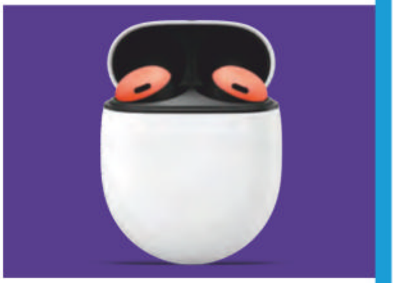

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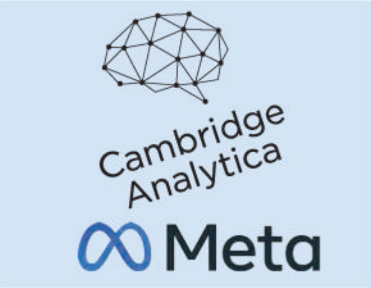


p12 Meta pays Australians $50m for Cambridge Analytica breach

WA retirement village reforms on the way

Retirement village residents are often in for a rude shock when it comes time to leave the village. Most have handed over a huge lump to secure a unit, and village operators all have their own rules for how much residents will get back. The amount will likely be reduced by numerous exit costs, which is bad enough. But even worse is that it can take a very long time to get what's left over.

The WA government recently announced it's moving forward on reforms that would require village operators to return exit entitlements to former residents within 12 months. That this is considered a big improvement shows you how bad the situation had become. Some WA residents had waited for two or three years to receive what they were owed. The new timeframe is due to come into effect in December 2025.

Other WA retirement village reforms slated to take effect this year include new disclosure requirements so incoming residents will have a clearer picture of the financial aspects of what they're getting into; a requirement that operators help with aged care costs while former residents are waiting for their exit entitlements; and more transparency around who's responsible for village maintenance.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Meta comes around to better scam protections for Australians

Criminals who infiltrated social media platforms stole $95 million from Australians in 2023, up 249% since 2020. And 76% of those 2023 losses happened because victims clicked on a scam ad on a Meta-owned platform, such as Facebook or Instagram. Things got better in 2024, but are still far from good enough. Between January and September 2024, Australians had reported losses of $35 million from social media scams.

A recent announcement raises hopes that scammers will find it harder to target victims, at least when it comes to financial services scams. Meta says it will introduce an advertiser verification system in Australia to take effect this month. Advertisers targeting Australians with financial services offers will have to take several steps to demonstrate that they're not scammers, including providing their Australian financial services licence number and uploading business documents. Facebook users will be able to review these materials before engaging with the ad.

"Meta's move to finally turn on such a simple protection against investment scams is overdue," says CHOICE campaigns director Rosie Thomas.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Bunnings facial recognition program ruled illegal

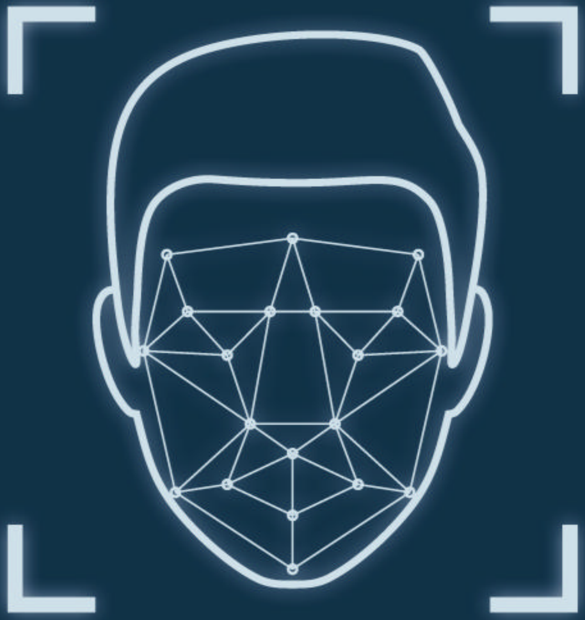
A CHOICE investigation in 2022 found that Bunnings, Kmart and The Good Guys were capturing biometric information on customers through facial recognition technology in stores, largely without customers' knowledge or consent.

Our findings caught the attention of the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC), which launched an investigation. The Good Guys immediately paused its trial of the technology following our report. Just over a month later, in July 2022, both Bunnings and Kmart announced they would halt their use of facial recognition technology.

But the OAIC investigation went forward. In November last year, OAIC announced the results regarding Bunnings, saying the company had breached Australia's Privacy Act. Privacy Commissioner Carly Kind said the facial recognition cameras that were in use in 63 Bunnings stores in Victoria and New South Wales between November 2018 and November 2021 likely captured the faces of hundreds of thousands of customers.

"Just because a technology may be helpful or convenient, does not mean its use is justifiable," she says.

JARNI BLAKKARLY



IMAGES: GETTY

FIRST LOOK

LOGITECH MX KEYS S COMBO FOR MAC
PRICE $399
CONTACT logitech.com/en-au
★★★★☆

No strings attached

The Logitech MX Keys S Combo for Mac is a wireless keyboard and mouse bundle that can seamlessly switch between a computer, smartphone or tablet and even your TV. How, you might ask? Through the use of simple, effective, shortcut keys.

There are three unique keys for jumping between devices on the top right of the keyboard. All you need to do is run the initial Bluetooth pairing process on supported phones, computers or other devices, as you would with a pair of headphones. Then, the keyboard can quickly connect with the press of these buttons.

It's not bound by a single ecosystem or operating system either. You can switch from MacOS to Windows, or iOS to Android, for example, with some light adjustments. Both mouse and keyboard move across to the new device when switching from the keyboard, which is also a nice feature.

The full-sized keyboard (with separate number pad) is responsive and comfortable, with short travel between keys. As well as the usual function keys such as brightness, volume and so on, there are a couple of modern touches. These include a ChatGPT shortcut, an emoji key, and a surprisingly effective voice-to-text function – a great feature if you happen to be using the combo in a messaging app.

The mouse is the very comfortable MX Master 3S, which delivers pinpoint accuracy, and offers several button and scroll combinations to move your cursor quickly wherever it is needed.

Sometimes, you just don't want to deal with a touchscreen or your TV's wand-like remote. Though set-up can be a tad fiddly, this keyboard and mouse combo's effortless device-switching largely solves these problems.

DENIS GALLAGHER

Six out of 10 migrant workers exploited

In a survey late last year of 959 migrant workers conducted by the Victoria-based Migrant Workers Centre, 62% of respondents reported experiencing at least one form of exploitation. Topping the list was being short-changed on wages or having to work in unsafe conditions. More than three out of 10 reported being injured at work. Much of this happens in food services jobs.

Until recently, for a worker to report that they were being compelled to work more hours than allowed would have been an act of self-sabotage. That's because reporting it means you're doing it, regardless of the reasons. And overstepping work restrictions would have been a visa violation under Section 235 of the Migration Act, punishable by visa cancellation. In July 2024, the Migration Act was updated through the *Migration Amendment (Strengthening Employer Compliance) Act 2024*. Section 235 was repealed and new whistleblower protections were added.

Section 235 "was identified as a barrier, preventing temporary migrants from reporting issues of exploitation or otherwise asserting their rights under workplace laws", a Department of Home Affairs spokesperson told us in December last year.

New reporting protections mean visas won't be cancelled for non-compliance "if there is a connection between that non-compliance and workplace exploitation".

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

CHOICE supporter evidence in ACCC Supermarket Inquiry

In November 2024, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) held hearings as part of its Supermarket Inquiry. Aldi, Coles, Metcash and Woolworths faced questioning by ACCC counsel Naomi Sharp SC over a wide range of topics including 'land banking', competition, issues in remote stores, member-only pricing, membership data, pricing practices, supply chain issues, shrinkflation and private-label products.

A significant moment came when both the Coles and Woolworths CEOs were shown examples of potentially dodgy price tags that had been sent in by CHOICE supporters. Your contributions ensured that the supermarkets were forced to confront the public's questions and concerns around supermarket pricing practices.

The ACCC Supermarkets Inquiry final report is due to the Treasurer by the end of this month, and will include findings and recommendations to address the multitude of problems in the supermarket sector. Separately, the ACCC is also suing Coles and Woolworths for allegedly deceiving customers with fake discounts.

Last year was a pivotal year for our supermarkets campaign, and we couldn't have done it without the help of CHOICE supporters like you.

BEA SHERWOOD

1/2 PRICE
PRICES DROPPED
FRESH Specials
Super Savers
1/2 Price
LOCKED

REDcycle soft plastic stockpiles still unprocessed

In December last year the ACCC signalled that it was willing to allow Coles, Woolworths and Aldi to continue collaborating on recycling stockpiled soft plastics and keep their pilot instore collection program running until 31 July 2026. The ACCC first authorised the supermarket collaboration in June 2023 following the collapse of REDcycle, which operated a soft plastics collection and recycling program.

"It is very concerning that the vast majority of the stockpiles left over from REDcycle have not been processed almost two years later. While some limited progress has been made on reducing the stockpiles, the rate of progress is still significantly limited by the available processing capacity of soft plastic processors," says ACCC deputy chair Mick Keogh.

"We understand the outlook for processing a larger share of the soft plastics stockpile is improving as more processors are due to come online in 2025, and we propose to grant authorisation to enable continued joint management of the stockpile without further delays."

The supermarkets will be required to provide the ACCC with quarterly progress reports and minutes of each meeting of the supermarkets' Soft Plastics Taskforce.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

IMAGES: GETTY | LOGITECH

Big fine for misleading 'local' online florist

Online florist Meg's Flowers has been slapped with a $1 million penalty by the Federal Court for making misleading representations in a case brought by the ACCC. The company admitted that it breached Australian Consumer Law by advertising itself as a local florist in towns and suburbs on 156 different websites and in 7462 Google advertisements.

"By making misleading claims about the location of the florists, Meg's Flowers denied some consumers the opportunity to make an informed decision to support a local business, and likely denied truly local businesses the opportunity to make a sale to those consumers," ACCC Commissioner Liza Carver says.

The florist must now establish a compliance program, publish a corrective notice on its website, and contribute to the ACCC's costs.

It's not the first time a florist has been caught in the ACCC's crosshairs. In 2022, the regulator acted against United Florists, and in 2024, Bloomex, a prior CHOICE Shonky award winner, was slapped with a similar $1 million penalty by the courts.

JARNI BLAKKARLY

Meg's Flowers
Hi!

HSBC Bank no help as scammers steal $23 million

In August last year, we reported that four out of five of the 280 scam victims we surveyed received no warning from their bank before transferring money to a scammer. About half of these scam victims told us that when they did receive some form of support from their bank, it didn't come close to helping them get their money back.

Cases of banks being held to account when they've inadvertently enabled a scam are rare, but it does happen. In December last year the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) took HSBC Bank to court for knowing that scam transactions were likely taking place and doing very little about it.

"We allege that from at least January 2023, HSBC Australia was aware of the risks of unauthorised transactions occurring and that there were gaps in their fraud controls. This resulted in some customers getting scammed out of $90,000 or more," says ASIC deputy chair Sarah Court.

Between January 2020 and August 2024, HSBC received approximately 950 reports of unauthorised transactions, resulting in customer losses of about $23 million, according to ASIC. Almost $16 million of this occurred in the six months from October 2023 to March 2024. The bank allegedly took an average of 145 days to investigate scams reported by its customers.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

HSBC

Bangin' buds

Google's Pixel Buds Pro 2 are a set of premium and pricey wireless earbuds that deliver great sound quality with a big dose of tech wizardry. You can learn to use these buds in such a way that your phone rarely has to leave the pocket or bag.

Default sound quality is excellent; there's great warmth, crispness, impact, and detail, with most musical genres represented well. But they're best suited to users of Google Pixel or other Android-based smartphones. iOS users won't get the most out of the features on offer.

The tiny buds fit comfortably and at only 62 grams can be worn for long periods without any discomfort. Combined battery life of the buds and carry case (which supports wireless charging) will comfortably get you a full day's use.

Active noise cancellation, combined with the snug fit, gives you a really effective seal against environmental sounds. Alternatively, transparency mode lets in just enough sound, such as conversation, so you can hear what's going on around you while listening to your favourite track.

You can enable the Google Assistant and ask your earbuds a lot of the usual stuff you'd ask your phone

The Google Pixel Buds Pro 2 can sense when you're wearing them and when you're not, and they can be controlled by touch – tap them to turn up the volume or skip a track. This ability to control with a tap, common with many of the latest earbuds, can be irritating when you're just trying to adjust the fit. However, you quickly learn where to hold the buds for adjustment and tap to either pause a track or take a phone call.

If you're comfortable with the use of a voice assistant, you can enable the Google Assistant and ask your earbuds a lot of the usual stuff you'd ask your phone or home smart speaker, such as directions, weather forecasts, translations, or to call someone. It's a handy addition for users who are already in Google's ecosystem.

There's a lot to like about Google's latest update to its flagship earbuds. Android users, especially those with a Pixel phone, should consider them.

ELIAS PLASTIRAS

GOOGLE PIXEL BUDS PRO 2

PRICE $379

CONTACT store.google.com

★★★★☆

Buy now, pay later to be regulated as credit

On Parliament's last sitting day of 2024, the government finally passed laws that will regulate buy now, pay later (BNPL) as a credit product.

BNPL was designed to fall within a technical loophole in our national credit laws. CHOICE and other consumer groups have been calling for this loophole to be closed for more than five years. In that time, BNPL services have become more popular, but there have been consistent signs that many users were in financial hardship and being left worse off by BNPL.

The new laws for BNPL will come into effect in June 2025, and will require providers to:

- retain a credit licence and provide data to ASIC about their lending practices
- retain membership to the Australian Financial Complaints Authority and allow customers to have their complaints heard by an ombudsman
- reasonably consider and respond to any requests for hardship assistance
- make reasonable assessments about whether a person is likely to be able to repay the amount they are borrowing before opening an account or increasing a credit limit.

We expect these laws to make BNPL a fairer, safer product for those who like to use it.

TOM ABOURIZK

IMAGES: GETTY

Crypto exchange dealt whopping fine

The corporate regulator ASIC has won legal proceedings in the Federal Court against Bit Trade, which operates the Kraken cryptocurrency exchange, for illegally issuing credit to more than 1100 Australian customers.

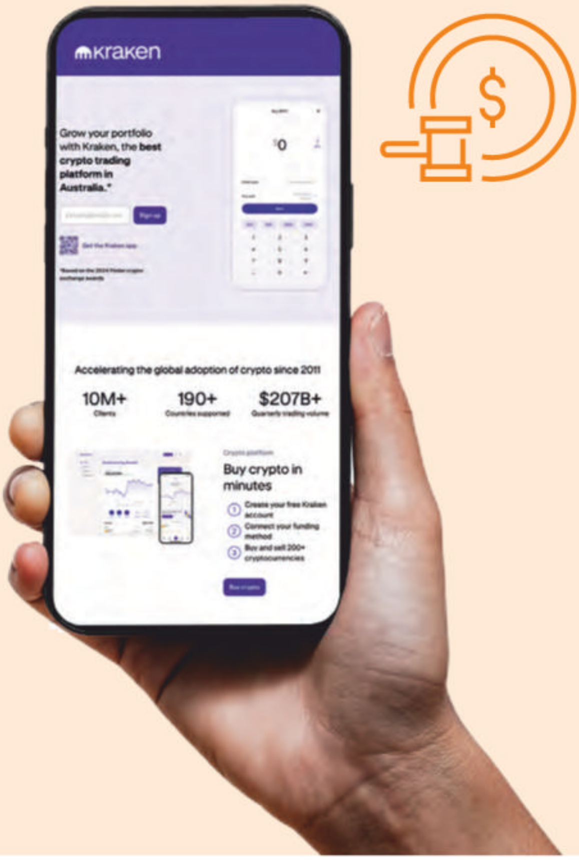
The court ruled that the crypto platform's "margin extension" product acted as a credit product, which Kraken did not have the correct target market determination to offer. As a result, the company breached its design and distribution obligations each time it offered the product – which amounts to thousands of times.

The court ordered Bit Trade to pay $8 million along with ASIC's costs for the proceedings.

"Target market determinations are fundamental in ensuring that investors are not inappropriately marketed products that could harm them," ASIC chair Joe Longo says.

"Bit Trade issued its margin extension product to over 1100 Australians who were charged fees and interest of more than US$7 million without considering if the product was appropriate for them. Those customers Bit Trade targeted suffered trading losses of more than US$5 million, including one investor who lost almost US$4 million."

JARNI BLAKKARLY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Grow your portfolio with Kraken, the best crypto trading platform in Australia.*
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Accelerating the global adoption of crypto since 2011
10M+
Clients
190+
Countries supported
$207B+
Quarterly trading volume
Buy crypto in minutes
Create your free Kraken account
Connect your funding method
Buy and sell 200+ cryptocurrencies

First set of Privacy Act amendments pass in Parliament

After years of consultation, the Federal Parliament has finally passed the first amendments to the Privacy Act to modernise protections over our personal information. These reforms went through in the final sitting of Parliament in 2024 that saw 32 bills pass in a whirlwind day. Key amendments in this package included letting individuals sue people or businesses that engage in serious invasions of privacy, expanding the penalty powers of the privacy watchdog, enabling a Children's Online Privacy Code, and transparency requirements for goods and services using automated decision-making.

There's still more to do – a second tranche of amendments will hopefully include much-needed laws to put obligations on businesses to use our data fairly and responsibly, an expansion of the definition of "personal information", and the removal of the exemption to small businesses. CHOICE has been a leading voice in consultations on privacy reform and will continue to represent consumers as these new laws are drafted.

RAFI ALAM

webjet
webjet.com.au

Webjet's flight offerings land them in court

In late 2024, the ACCC commenced proceedings in the Federal Court against online travel booking site Webjet for allegedly making false and misleading representations about flight prices and bookings. The ACCC alleged Webjet advertised "flights from $X" when the price quoted didn't include compulsory servicing fees and other fees unavoidably added on to the booking. It is alleged the misleading advertising occurred at various points between November 2018 and November 2023. They say the fees were not disclosed on social media posts by the company and were hidden in the fine print of emails and on the Webjet site.

"We know how much Australian consumers value air travel to stay connected for work, leisure or to visit family. During this time of cost pressures, many consumers are carefully considering travel arrangements and seeking to save money. A statement about the lowest price must be a true minimum price, not a price subject to further fees and charges before a booking can be made," ACCC chair Gina Cass-Gottlieb says.

JARNI BLAKKARLY

IMAGES: GETTY

Google's 94% market share under the microscope

It probably won't come as a surprise that Google dominates the search engine market. In December last year, the ACCC reported that Google had a market share of nearly 94% as of August 2024. Its nearest rival, Bing, had just 4.7% of the Australian market. These are the kinds of statistics that raise concerns for competition regulators.

One big reason that Google continues to be the default search engine on the majority of browsers is because it has arrangements with third parties for it to be pre-installed on devices. In August 2024, a US District Court ruled in favour of the US Department of Justice that Google had illegally maintained its monopoly in search and search advertising through its exclusive distribution agreements. It remains to be seen whether similar legal action will happen in Australia.

Meanwhile, the ACCC is also looking into how artificial intelligence (AI) affects search results. "We are at a critical inflection point where generative AI tools are enabling technological innovations across a range of digital platform services," says ACCC Commissioner Peter Crone. "While some consumers may find the generative AI search experience more useful and efficient, others may be concerned about the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated responses to search queries."

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Google
Lorem
Search...

Superannuation funds need customer service standards

When you choose a super fund, performance and fees might be high priorities. But what about customer service? There are currently no mandatory standards for how funds interact with members and process claims.

The fund Cbus made headlines recently when it was hit with court action by ASIC over massive death benefit and insurance claims-handling delays. But to pursue this case, the regulator has had to invoke a very broad legal duty, because of the lack of clear relevant laws.

Super Consumers Australia is calling on the government to mandate standards for super funds – not just around claims handling, but all aspects of member services. First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse communities are especially impacted by poor practices that don't account for cultural differences.

And if timely claims handling is indeed a factor for you when deciding between funds, you won't find data to compare. We're calling on ASIC and the financial services regulator APRA to collect this information and make it public.

"Mandatory standards plus public accountability are the only way to stop the distressing experiences we hear about so often," says Super Consumers Australia advocacy manager Susan Quinn.

ANTOINETTE DYCE

Compensation for Cambridge Analytica victims

Remember the Cambridge Analytica scandal back in 2018? The personal information of around 50 million Facebook users was disclosed to the This is Your Digital Life app on the platform, and then the data was allegedly used, among other things, to affect the outcome of the US election.

Well, it seems the wheels of digital justice turn slowly, but in December last year, the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner announced that it had agreed to a $50 million payment program from Facebook owner Meta to settle legal proceedings in Australia. The money will go to affected Facebook users in Australia.

The settlement "represents the largest ever payment dedicated to addressing concerns about the privacy of individuals in Australia," says Information Commissioner Elizabeth Tydd.

Meta is expected to appoint a third party to administer the payment scheme this year. The payment scheme will be open to individuals who:

- held a Facebook Account between 2 November 2013 and 17 December 2015;
- were present in Australia for more than 30 days during that period; and
- either installed the This is Your Digital Life app or were Facebook friends with an individual who installed the app.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

RANTS AND RAVES

We gave it away to the bots

They borrowed our brains – without asking – to train their bots. This has to be the crime of the century. That said, I acknowledge that resistance is futile. Big Tech pulled one over on us, and artificial intelligence (AI) is here to stay. It just seems fair that we should get some royalties or kickbacks or something for training the machines to destroy us – or maybe just take our jobs.

As we went about our business, they were listening in – heck, looking in – on our every utterance, our every move. They learned from our collective style of writing, of speaking, of being, and spat it all back out to us in the form of services we probably don't need. And we gave it away for free! Somebody call the police.

I guess the lesson here is that if there are no laws against something and the profit motive is chugging along, companies are going to do this sort of thing. But the scale of what's happened with AI inventing and reiterating itself with us as its unwitting tutors is something new. This is something off the charts.

How were they listening? Well, they bugged our TVs, our cars, of course our computers and devices, probably even our toasters. The point is that we don't know all the places Big Tech is getting information from us. They don't want us to know. It's impossible to talk about this stuff without sounding like a conspiracy theorist – probably because it is a conspiracy!

One thing I've noticed lately, though, is that the bots may not always be that bright. Just the other day, Google flagged a word I typed as not existing. It wasn't a fancy word, but of course I had to second guess myself, since the Google gods had weighed in. Yes, it was definitely a valid word. I overrode the bot's guidance and added it to my dictionary. Hopefully it won't happen again. You're welcome, Google.

It just seems fair that we should get some royalties or kickbacks for training the machines to destroy us

It goes without saying that the exchange usually goes the other way.

The bots are constantly anticipating what we're trying to say, correcting us before we've had a chance to say it. I speak here of auto-correct and auto-fill, where you start to type something, and the machine falls all over itself filling in the blanks ahead of you.

This is where I have taken my stand. Dear readers, I propose to you that auto-correct can destroy your spelling skills, and I say this based on personal experience. The principle is simple – use it or lose it. So, I don't let the machine finish spelling the word or completing the sentence for me. Not anymore. Which is how I've discovered that my spelling skills have atrophied to a level that compromises my self-respect. I taught the bots, and then they took over and I let them! I'm going to go out now and buy a notebook and some pens and practice my spelling.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

IMAGES: GETTY

ASK THE EXPERTS

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

ASK US

Email your question to **asktheexperts@choice.com.au** or write to Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

You can also tap into the 'brains trust' at **www.choice.community**.

Q When I use my microwave while casting something to my TV via Google Chromecast, the stream cuts out almost every time. There aren't any walls between my microwave and my TV (open plan kitchen and living room). The microwave is very old – do I need a new one or is this normal?

A CHOICE small appliances expert Kim Gilmour: We've had that question a few times over the years, and it does tend to affect older microwaves. Most likely, your microwave is using the same 2.4GHz frequency band as the Chromecast. Try connecting the Chromecast to your router's 5GHz frequency band, to see if it helps. If you have a first-generation Chromecast it may not support 5GHz, in which case you might need to get a new microwave (or Chromecast), or avoid casting when it is in use.

Q In deciding which home insurance policy to buy, I used your tool to assess an insurer I was considering but didn't know much about – Honey Insurance. I compared Honey to three other insurers including your top recommendation, Australia Post. I then got quotes from all four insurers myself. Your comparison tool showed quite minor differences between Honey and Australia Post (and in some cases Honey is better), yet Honey scores a much lower cover score – why? And my quote for Australia Post was double Honey's price even though it has a better price score. So, my own fact check throws doubt on your expert rating, cover score and price indication – can you explain?

A CHOICE insurance expert Daniel Graham: I totally understand your confusion, but rest assured there is a lot of logic behind Honey's lower cover score. The biggest factor is that Honey (unlike Australia Post) does not have an underinsurance safety net. We think this is an important feature for a home insurance policy, as it can protect you from being substantially out of pocket in the event of a total loss. For this reason the safety net is the most heavily weighted part of the cover score.

The other points of difference appear small individually but are numerous and are mostly related to how each policy handles sublimits. Areas where Australia Post outscores Honey include cover for legal liability, temporary accommodation and contents in the open air. As you've noted there are a couple of features in which Honey outperforms Australia Post, such as cover for landscaping, visitors' contents and food spoilage. We assess 140 product dimensions when calculating the cover score, so many small differences can add up to a sizable gap when the final scores are calculated.

As for the prices, having a good price score does not automatically mean that the insurer will be cheaper in all situations. The price score is the outcome of many individual price comparisons, using up to ten thousand addresses for nationally available policies. Because each insurer handles risk differently, there are going to be scenarios where an insurer with a good price score quotes a higher premium than one with a poor price score, as you have experienced. For example, in our latest comparison, Honey was cheaper than Australia Post in 27% of quotes – it looks like you're in that 27%. This is why we always advise people to obtain their own quotes to compare policies.

Q **I have a question about canned goods. I had a recipe that called for 400g of chickpeas, so I bought a 400g can. But when I drained away the liquid the chickpeas themselves weighed a lot less than 400g. Is it appropriate that the weight seems to include liquid that is to be discarded?**

A **CHOICE Customer Service:** Unfortunately there's currently no requirement in Australia for manufacturers to label the drained weight of food in cans. The label states the net weight, which is the weight of the contents (both solids and liquid) minus the packaging. For foods packaged with liquid, the weight of the food alone isn't going to be the same as – and may not even be close to – the weight on the label.

If you're likely to consume both the food and the liquid, such as with canned tomatoes or sliced peaches, for example, then this isn't really an issue.

But there are many types of canned foods where you'll likely drain off and discard the liquid – chickpeas as you've mentioned, but also things like tuna in spring water or corn kernels.

To find out how much food you'll be getting before you open the can, you need to check the percentage labelling in the ingredients list (for example, it may say chickpeas (60%), water (40%)) and then do your own calculations based on the net weight to work out the drained weight.

CHOICE Help

Dude, where's my car?

When CHOICE member Lori ordered a new Kluger from a Toyota dealer in the ACT in August 2023, she understandably expected she'd be getting the model she had picked out. She had purchased several cars from the dealership over the years as well as made use of its finance services.

Lori put a hefty deposit down and was told the car would arrive by December. But December came and went. It seems someone at the dealership had forgotten to process the order.

When that got straightened out and the car finally arrived in Australia in July 2024, a new problem emerged: it wasn't the car she had ordered, and this model cost $3300 more, something she belatedly discovered after paying the balance on the invoice. It was also missing the floor and cargo mats that were included in her original purchase invoice. She was told that invoice no longer applied, since the car she'd ended up with was a different car.

The Toyota dealership apologised, but when Lori asked that the extra $3300 be refunded, the response was that they would look into it.

This turn of events did not sit well with Lori – an engaged consumer – and she wrote to us to ask if the way Toyota had acted was reasonable.

We told Lori that unfortunately we've heard similar stories from other buyers of new cars. We said it was totally reasonable that she should expect to receive the car she ordered at the price she had agreed on.

We told her she had two real choices: to demand redress and compensation from the dealership or, failing that, to escalate the matter to her state's fair trading agency. The next step would be to take the matter to the state tribunal.

Lori then began a campaign of setting things right that included letting the dealership know she'd made CHOICE aware of the issue and was prepared to lodge a complaint with the ACT office of fair trading. She also made clear that she would refinance her vehicle with another provider, have her car serviced elsewhere, and never buy a car from the dealership again.

Lori's campaign paid off. In the end the dealership came around and offered Lori a refund of $1650 plus free servicing for the life of the five-year warranty, which would more than cover the other $1650. They also threw in the missing mats for free.

CHOICE Help is our in-house advice service for CHOICE members. We'll arm you with the information and tools you need to tackle your consumer issue and help you work towards a solution.

CONTACT US at **choice.com.au/choicehelp**.

CHOICE

YOUR SAY

If you've had a bad experience, been ripped off or scammed, tell us and help other CHOICE members avoid the same traps. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

CONTACT US!

Email us at
yoursay@choice.com.au
or write to Your Say,
CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road,
Marrickville, NSW 2204.

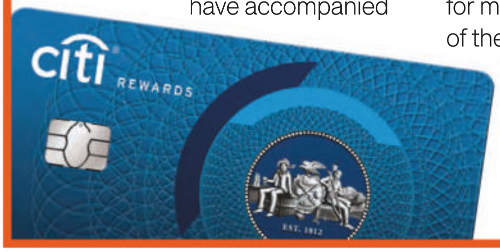
Credit cold shoulder

I have been a client of Citibank, using their credit facility, since September 2001 – almost a quarter of a century. I have been very happy with the service up until recently. In June 2022, NAB purchased the credit card section of Citibank. My yearly credit fee increased three-fold, from $99 a year to $299. At the same time, my 'interest-free period' was reduced from around four weeks to two.

I always pay within the interest-free period and I've made profitable use of the 'bells and whistles' that have accompanied the Citibank credit card; notably the rewards points (we use our credit card extensively and collect between $300 and $400 worth of rewards per year) and the complimentary international travel insurance (though I have never needed to make a claim).

When I contacted customer service, they were quick to explain how I could cancel my card. There was no hard sell, no plea for me to stay nor explanation of the dramatic increase and decrease. Clearly they don't want me as a customer; I am just not profitable.

Grant Gavin,
Lake Macquarie, NSW



We purchased a 65-inch LG TV recommended by CHOICE. It was 19 months out of warranty when horizontal lines appeared halfway across the TV screen. We contacted LG Care and sent photos of the fault and purchase invoice. After a couple of days their service people arrived to collect the TV. It was repaired and returned in under four hours!

Paul Laurie,
Mooloolah Valley, Qld

We have a Samsung four-door French fridge with icemaker and sparkling water dispenser, bought in November 2017. The icemaker failed recently. The fridge was well out of warranty. I telephoned Samsung customer assistance and was promised the local service people would contact me within 48 hours and repairs be completed within seven days, if repairable. I got a call the next day, and a technician came within the week and replaced the faulty parts. Samsung provided this service entirely free of charge, the technician was delightful, and we now have ice.

Giles Coakes, Broadmeadow, NSW

Our almost new Glacier DC ceiling fan developed an annoying clicking noise and a small piece of metal fell from the fan. After a warranty inquiry, the company contacted us quickly and advised that the fan would be replaced. As soon as a fan was available it was promptly installed by their electrician. Great customer service.

Julie Banks, Wellington Point, Qld

A while ago, my daughter presented me with a Smeg toaster. The warranty was for two years. The toaster failed to function after two-and-a-half years. Being a one-person household and often away for long periods, I believe that toaster's use was below normal. I read up on Australian Consumer Law and several CHOICE articles about similar issues. Subsequently, I decided to contact Smeg, stated my case and asked for a free repair or replacement. I was directed to Smeg's 'diamond service department', and the response was immediate and positive. A new toaster, the same model and colour, arrived a few days later at my doorstep.

Axel H. Leonhardt, Hastings, Vic

IMAGES: GETTY | VENTAIR | SMEG

CHOICE SOCIAL MEDIA

Join the conversation online. We're on Facebook, Threads, Instagram and our own forum, CHOICE Community. This month: Appliance retailers, stick vacs and more.

Community

choice.community

What is your preferred appliance store?

@gary2: In South Australia, I've had good service and competitive prices from JB Hi-Fi and The Good Guys, but when it comes to whitegoods and household appliances, Spartan Electrical lead the pack.

@SueW: Appliances Online (owned by Winning) every time. They aren't always cheapest (in which case one waits for a price drop), but they have great service. I like that I can get free shipping, next-day delivery, free removal of old appliances... all of which incur a separate cost with many retailers.

@PhilT: For travellers to Victoria where there is an E&S, you almost owe it to yourselves to visit one. The one on Chifley Dr (Preston) is awesome and with impeccable sales service.

@Windyhill: In the Winning Appliances store they will match the Appliances Online prices and any of the online offers.

Facebook

@choiceaustralia

How do you measure and choose the right TV size?

Craig R: Simple rule. Buy the biggest one you can afford.

Adam H: I have three TVs. All 50 or 55-inch. Crazy that the most popular size is 65-inch. That's huge.

Steve E: I bought a 75-inch in a Black Friday sale as my 42-inch had died. Sitting just over 2.5m away, I find the picture big enough I don't have to bother wearing glasses.

Threads

@choiceaustralia

Do you own a stick vacuum?

@steveaney: Yes, one Bosch and one Dyson. Switching away from Dyson as they don't last. Been through too many so trying another brand.

@secondmouse: Yep. Love the HEPA filter and all the little doo-dads. I also like not having to do the 'power point shuffle' or waste time doing the rounds of the vacuum specialty stores trying to buy vacuum bags to fit my old second-hand, $20 garage sale relic.

@thomas.o.lodge: I own a vacuum on a stick.

@jerseyboy121: I also own a dog mop! He licks the floor clean!

Instagram

@choiceaustralia

A real estate agency published a renter's personal information in an act of retaliation. What are your thoughts?

@my.travel.tapestry: How unprofessional. The agent might have been upset with the review, but I don't think this is the way to handle it.

@my_lips_to_gods_ear: Wow, it's scary the data that's handed over.

@kirraleaf: At my last inspection, [the agent] brought this weird camera that she set up on a tripod in every part of the house, even the hallway, and took 3D 180-degree photos of every inch of the house including personal photos and books. I felt uneasy about this. I contacted the RTA [Residential and Tenancies Authority] afterwards and they said this is a complete breaking of code due to my right to enjoy peaceful privacy. ■

golden circle

Running on empty

Groceries cost more than twice as much in remote First Nations communities, an investigation by **Jarni Blakkarly** reveals

Like many people on the Tiwi Islands in the Northern Territory, Rosie Woolley and her partner Denis Coolwel, pictured above, know what it is like to go hungry.

The young parents of twin three-year-old boys say their Centrelink income rarely lasts them two weeks and they often skip meals for several days to make sure their kids are fed.

"The boys were born in 2021, that's when my life changed. With the shop prices, I didn't realise it was that much to support a little family," Rosie says.

"Their favourite food is curry, so I make curry sausages, chicken or steak, but when I'm low on money I just use whatever I have in the house, like noodles."

Like many remote First Nations communities around the country, there are few options for food in town. The exorbitantly high prices for what is available combined with low incomes leads to widespread food insecurity.

They often skip meals for several days to make sure their kids are fed

TRIDENT
COCONUT MILK
KEEN'S
CURRY
Edgell
BABY PEAS & CORN
TRIDENT

"I usually spend over about $300 to $500 for grocery shopping to keep us going. It's meant to keep us going two weeks, but it lasts us for a week due to the amount it costs for the food," says Rosie.

Towards the end of the fortnight, Rosie says it's common for her to go around town asking family and friends for money to help feed the boys.

"It feels kind of embarrassing when you have to ask for help. You want to be independent, but you can't because the prices at the shops are really high," she says.

High prices and limited choice

Only 80km from Darwin, Wurrumiyanga is the biggest community in the Tiwi Islands and was home to 1400 residents at the last census, over 85% of whom were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

There are usually two ways to get to the Tiwi Islands: a short flight from Darwin on a small plane, or a longer SeaLink ferry ride. When CHOICE visited the community in September 2024, the ferry was out of service and had been for weeks. A barge arrives in town twice a week bringing in food supplies and other heavy goods.

Flying in, the stunning blue waters give way to idyllic white sand beaches and mangrove forests. But the beautiful water here hides dangers. Saltwater crocodiles lurk beneath, making the beaches unsafe to swim and escape the oppressive heat and humidity.

On the main street in town many locals gather in groups and sit in the shade under the large trees to stay cool. Card games are a popular pastime.

The Old Shop has a shaded area as well where people gather. A big yellow sign reads 'No Card Games permitted, No smoking, No fighting on premise'.

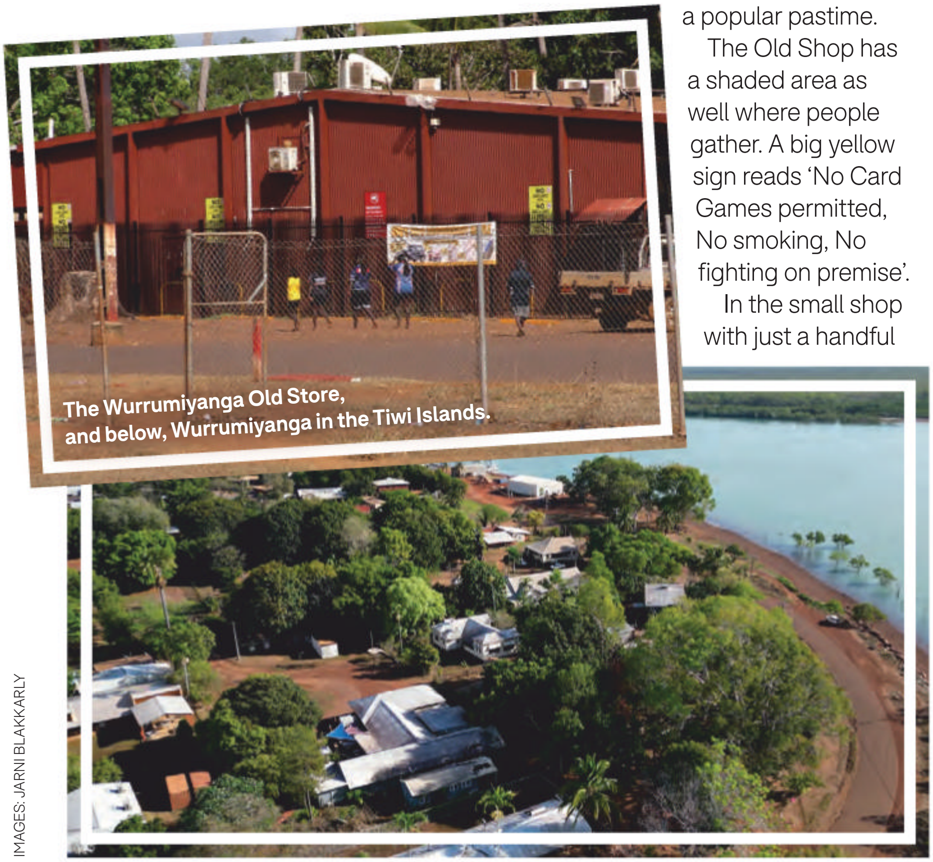
In the small shop with just a handful of aisles, the prices for everyday essential items are high. We found tins of canned tomato soup, which would sell for $2.50 at a major supermarket in a capital city, priced at $7 here. A tin of spam meat which usually sells for $6.80 in a capital city was $11.

> **"You want to be independent, but you can't because the prices at the shops are really high"**

The labels sometimes didn't match the item on the shelf, and other products, including some fruit and vegetables, didn't have price labels at all.

Unlike many remote First Nations communities, which have one store in the town, Wurrumiyanga has two stores. But Bernard Tipiloura, one of the Traditional Owners and Elders of the community, says both have high prices and the competition hasn't helped much.

"We want to protest about high price, because high price is not good ... Also it's not healthy food, those foods there some of them are not good for us," he says.



The Wurrumiyanga Old Store, and below, Wurrumiyanga in the Tiwi Islands.

IMAGES: JARNI BLAKKARLY

Prices compared

The issues of food insecurity and high prices are not limited to the Tiwi Islands. Boandik woman Bettina Cooper, a financial counsellor with Mob Strong Debt Help, says the high prices seen in communities on the Tiwi Islands are felt around the country.

"When we're traveling to remote communities there's often only one choice of a local store. So whatever price is there is the price you pay," she says.

To gather a sample of the price gap between urban centres and remote First Nations communities, CHOICE mystery shopped four remote community stores – two in Western Australia and two in the Northern Territory. ▶

The Western Australian stores were in the Great Sandy Desert and the Pilbara, while the Northern Territory shops were in the West Daly region and on Tiwi Islands. In each of the four communities we bought a list of nine basic items – many of which could be deemed "essentials" – and compared the cost of the basket to identical items from capital cities around Australia.

The basket of items cost on average $44.70 when averaged out across Woolworths, Coles, Aldi and IGA and across all capital cities. The average price in the four remote First Nations community's stores was more than double that at $99.38. The highest price we found was in the West Daly region where the same basket cost a whopping $110.82.

Alan Gray, managing director of financial counselling nonprofit Bush Money Mob, describes the health impacts of the poor food options he sees in the remote Western Australian communities he visits as an "unfolding tragedy".

"Once you get away from the bitumen, people living in remote Aboriginal communities get very few services that mainstream Australians take for granted. Food and the options of healthy, affordable food is one of them," he says.

What are the solutions?

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) is currently in the process of developing a National Strategy for Food Security in Remote First Nations Communities, which is expected to be finished in 2025.

"The Australian Government is committed to addressing food insecurity in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and recognises access to nutritious affordable food is critical to improving health outcomes in remote communities and building better futures," the agency says.

CHOICE, along with First Nations organisations including Mob Strong Debt Help and the Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network (ICAN), has made a range of recommendations in a joint submission to the NIAA. These include exploring price caps on essential items in consultation with community and mandatory pricing information on all items.

"When we're talking about Closing The Gap, we're talking about closing the gap so that First Nations people have equity in the ability to keep their family and live long healthy lives," says Cooper from Mob Strong.

"A core part of having a healthy life is being able to afford and purchase good food to feed your family three square meals a day. If food isn't priced correctly, then you don't know that you can afford to do that and you might end up not being able to feed your family for the whole week or the whole day," she adds.

Another recommendation to address high supply chain costs is that the government consider the role of subsidies for freight of essential food and grocery items.

In Far North Queensland, freight subsidisation is already in place in some 30 remote communities on the mainland and in the Torres Strait

Prices compared

$44.70 The average price across Woolworths, Coles, Aldi and IGA.

$99.38 The average price in the four remote First Nations community stores we visited.

$110.82 The highest price we found was in the West Daly region.

NOTE: We bought a basket of nine basic items from four remote community stores in August 2024, and compared the cost to the average price of a similar basket from major supermarkets in Australia's capital cities.

Prices at the major supermarkets

Separate to our remote grocery investigation, and as part of our quarterly supermarket survey, in June 2024 CHOICE visited 104 supermarkets across the country, including Aldi, Coles, Woolworths and IGA, and recorded the prices of 14 common grocery items. Here are some of our key findings on how prices vary between supermarkets in different states.

Aldi: The best prices for Aldi were available in ACT and NSW.

Woolworths: Prices were highest at Woolworths in WA.

Coles: Prices were highest in WA and lowest in Tasmania.

IGA: The size of the store makes a big difference. The same basket of goods is vastly more expensive for shoppers at the smaller IGA stores in NT.

Denis Coolwel and Rosie Woolley spend up to $500 on groceries for their small family. It's supposed to last two weeks, but usually only lasts one.

through Community Enterprise Queensland (CEQ), a state government scheme. According to CEQ, basket pricing comparisons of fruit and vegetable items at their stores have found prices to be on average $10 cheaper than those of other remote grocery stores.

ICAN, which works extensively throughout Far North Queensland, told CHOICE that communities like Wujal Wujal, where a new CEQ store recently opened, are experiencing better food prices than in the past.

Lynda Edwards, a Wangkumara and Barkandji woman from Financial Counselling Australia, says policymakers should also consider increasing social security benefits to better reflect the actual cost of living in extremely remote communities.

"There has got to be an appetite from whoever is in government, because the current system that's in place now is just not working," she says.

"Most people will share food in the community, it's the way that we live, we share food"

Online shopping slow to take off

The CatholicCare NT building in Wurrumiyanga is raised on stilts on the second floor and sits just across from the old historic church built in 1941.

Inside, on a hot afternoon, Gerald Kaggwa, who has been living on the island for two years, explains how he tries to encourage local residents to buy their groceries online from Woolworths or Coles in Darwin and get it delivered via the barge.

"We help people to open online accounts and then they do online shopping. They can access shops in Darwin which have cheaper-priced products," he explains. "If you spend $150 at the shop, you will have roughly a $30 charge for freight on the barge, but then the same goods may cost $400 in the shop here, so it will save a lot of money."

Despite offering to set up online accounts for his clients, he says there hasn't been much uptake, something he puts down to the fact that many people don't have money to plan ahead for next week's shop. Low levels of internet connectivity and online literacy are also factors.

Shane Kerinaiua, an Elder in the community, says everyone in the town is doing it tough because of high food prices. He says they often want to go out and do traditional hunting of seafood and fish, but even this is made difficult because the price of petrol for the boats is above three dollars a litre.

"I see the Elders and the youngens', on both islands, across the three communities, it doesn't get any better," he says.

Despite the challenges, Shane says the community will always come together when they can.

"Most people will share food in the community, it's the way that we live, we share food."

Jester Carbone, a financial counsellor with CatholicCare NT, says most people living in the big cities have no idea how expensive it is in remote communities.

"I met some people who came from down south and they were shocked at how expensive things are here," he says. "It's a different level of poverty. Whatever you can get in Darwin they deserve to get it and be able to afford it here too." ■

MOBILE SHOPPING
Add to Cart
Banana
Apple
Bread
Cucumbers
Potato
Peach
Buy

IMAGES: JARNI BLAKKARLY / GETTY

Rating game

With the rise of all things AI, **Liam Kennedy** looks at whether it's safe to trust a chatbot to recommend your next purchase

In the two years we've had easy access to AI (artificial intelligence) chatbots, they've captured attention with their ability to simplify everyday tasks.

ChatGPT, launched in 2022, has been followed by a flurry of competing services from rivals such as Meta and Google. All deliver quick, succinct and personalised responses to queries and are predicted to play an expanding role in our lives, especially in areas such as customer service.

But how reliable is the information and advice these platforms put out?

5 poor-performing products recommended by AI

We asked the free versions of two popular AI chatbots – ChatGPT and Meta AI – to suggest five good products we could buy across household appliance categories that included robot vacuums, air fryers and portable cots. We then assessed the quality of the AI recommendations based on CHOICE reviews and expertise.

AI is changing all the time and the following results are drawn from recommendations these chatbots gave us in October 2024. Here are five of their most dubious suggestions:

1. A ROBOT VAC THAT FLUNKED OUR TESTS

In a warning to anyone hoping that ChatGPT could help them find a way to clean up after their pooch, one robo vac "highly recommended" to us by the chatbot is actually unlikely to impress in a hairy situation.

ChatGPT claims the **Samsung Jet Bot AI+ robot vac** has strong suction power, implying it's good at picking up debris. But our real-life test results tell a different story.

CHOICE experts evaluate robot vacuums on how good they are at removing real pet hair from a real carpet, and this model with a recommended retail price (RRP) of $1699 came back with a score of 25% – equal second-worst in our latest review. And its carpet cleaning score, which measures how good it is at removing dirt, was almost as poor – just 33%.

NEED TO KNOW

- We asked Meta AI and ChatGPT to recommend products to buy based on a few basic queries.
- The suggestions included items our expert testers have found to be poor performers or unsafe.
- CHOICE thoroughly and independently tests every product we review, so our verdict is (a lot) more reliable than AI.

Considering we see cheaper robot vacuums performing better on both metrics, we won't be joining ChatGPT in singing the praises of this particular sucker.

2. AN AIR FRYER THAT DOESN'T DO A GOOD JOB ON CHIPS

It's the primary purpose for more than a few home ovens, so you'd think an air fryer would be decent at cooking the humble frozen chip.

Our air fryer testers check how good each model is at cooking popular foods, and while the **Ninja Air Fryer Max AF160** holds its own on some dishes, it falls short on frozen chips. It scored just 60% when we ran it through its paces with 700g of straight-cut fries – the third-worst performer of all 37 models in our latest test.

The Ninja air fryer's poor potato performance makes ChatGPT's crowing about its "great crispiness" all the more bewildering.

Beyond just chips, we found we had to turn on the device's max crisp function to get good results on most frozen foods.

This $150 appliance didn't come last on overall performance, but its mid-range status and the fact that better air fryers are available for less means we find ChatGPT's recommendation questionable.

3. A VIDEO DOORBELL WITH POOR SOUND QUALITY

Hello? Hello? What did you say? You might find yourself saying this more than you'd like with the **Arlo Essential Video Doorbell**.

Also recommended to us by ChatGPT in response to our query: "What are five good smart doorbells to buy in Australia?", this model placed middle of the pack when we tested the wire-free version, but anyone using it could be hard-pressed to hear the person speaking on the other end.

Its sound quality score of 40% put it among the bottom five of 18 models on this metric in our latest review. It was also one of the more difficult devices to install, with instructions that failed to mention you might have to go online to get support to finish the job.

4. A BASSINET THAT MAY BE DANGEROUS FOR BABIES

The **Stokke Sleepi Mini V3 crib** was one of Meta AI's top picks when we asked the Facebook-affiliated chatbot to recommend bassinets.

It's an endorsement we would never give.

The Stokke was one of several models we found that could pose a suffocation risk to babies, and it therefore failed to pass our in-house safety test. When placed in the bassinet, the required mattress is insufficiently firm at areas where the covering is puffed at the sides and ends – a suffocation risk if a baby rolls face first into them.

It's worth noting that at the time of testing last year, there was no Australian standard for bassinets, but there is one being phased in now. We used our own in-house method that considers whether the bassinet meets what we consider to be key safety requirements.

Following our verdict, Stokke had the mattress retested by an accredited third-party lab, where the sample passed. CHOICE stands by its results on the model we tested.

5. A PORTABLE COT THAT POSES A SUFFOCATION RISK

When we asked Meta AI to suggest some good portable cots, it again recommended ▶

> **The Ninja air fryer's poor potato performance makes ChatGPT's crowing about its "great crispiness" all the more bewildering**

AI chatbots gave these products the thumbs up. Our expert testers give them the thumbs down.

IMAGE: GETTY

a product CHOICE expert testing has found to be potentially dangerous.

It told us to consider Kmart's **Anko 3-In-1 Portacot**, but this model recorded what we consider to be a serious safety failure when we tested it for our latest review. We found its mattress wasn't firm enough, creating a possible suffocation risk if a baby rolls onto their side or front.

Our safety tests measure portable cots against the requirements of the latest safety standard.

We found AI chatbots have a tendency to recommend brands in general instead of specific products

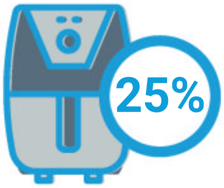
Kmart disagreed with our results, showing us reports from other third-party labs, indicating that their products pass safety standards. We operate our own in-house accredited lab and stand by our results.

Other issues with AI recommendations

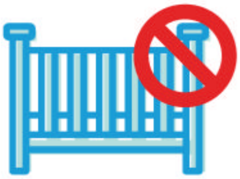
Beyond dodgy product suggestions, we found AI chatbots have several other flaws that make them less than ideal for helping you compile your next homewares shopping list. These include a tendency to recommend brands in general instead of specific products and, if a prompt isn't specific enough, naming models that aren't widely available in Australia.

HELLO!
WHAT CAN I HELP YOU ?

The problems with asking AI for product recommendations



1 Poor-performing appliances



2 Potentially dangerous items

3 Goods that aren't widely available

4 Brands instead of specific models

IMAGE: GETTY

Why AI isn't good at recommending products

The AI chatbots we consulted in this investigation did occasionally surface good products. But the fact that they can just as quickly recommend poor performers makes it hard to trust these platforms when settling on what could be a significant purchase.

While ChatGPT and Meta AI do have disclaimers admitting they make mistakes and advising users to verify information themselves, the increasing ubiquity of these tools means consumers could be pushed toward unsatisfactory and even dangerous products.

So why is AI spruiking these items? To find out, we went straight to the source and asked ChatGPT and Meta AI where they get their recommendations from.

ChatGPT explained it looks at performance, customer reviews, brand reputation and safety features when recommending products such as robot vacuums, air fryers and smart doorbells. However, its sources for this information included a product's own manufacturer, social media, internet forums and some for-profit comparison sites.

When we asked Meta AI how it recommends bassinets and portable cots, a spokesperson indicated it was solely relying on retailer's own websites.

In response to our questions about the problems we found with their platforms' recommendations, Meta didn't comment beyond drawing attention to its disclaimer. OpenAI, the developer of ChatGPT, did not respond to requests for comment.

How CHOICE combats misinformation

CHOICE senior campaigns and policy adviser Rafi Alam says the penetration of AI as a relatively unregulated and experimental information source into our lives could be highly problematic.

> **"Consumers are facing new risks as AI platforms grow in popularity, ranging from minor inconveniences to serious harms"**

"Consumers are facing new risks as AI platforms grow in popularity, ranging from minor inconveniences to serious harms," he says.

"Fortunately, the government has started to look at ways to address these risks, including reviewing the law to see if it can be modernised to include mandatory guardrails on the use of high-risk AI across our economy."

Unlike the recommendations you might get from AI, CHOICE Expert Ratings and product reviews are the result of extensive independent product testing by industry experts. Our testers scrutinise popular items across a range of key criteria, including performance in different areas, ease of use, privacy and, of course, safety.

We buy all the goods we review ourselves, are independent from manufacturers and retailers, and don't preferentially score a product just because it's from a certain brand. ■

Stores that score

When buying electronics and appliances, a smooth shopping and after-sales experience is key. **Matthew Steen** reveals who does it best, according to CHOICE readers

When you're in the market for a new washing machine or TV, do you like the ease that comes with buying online from the comfort of your own home? Or do you prefer the experience of shopping instore and sizing up the products in person before you commit?

With the current cost of living, good value for money is a major selling point. But which stores have the widest range of products? And which ones can you count on for good customer service?

We asked more than 3500 CHOICE supporters about their experiences buying appliances in the past 12 months, and whether they were satisfied with the stores they visited.

For physical stores, we asked participants to rate the range of products and brands, value for money, customer service, delivery, after-sales service, deals and discounts offered and also store appearance.

For online stores, we asked much the same, but added ease of using the website, payment options, the returns process and level of product details. We included results for stores that had over 50 responses.

Instore shopping

OVERALL SATISFACTION

BEST: E&S TRADING

E&S Trading took out our coveted top spot for instore shopping, with many people praising its after-sales service, range of products and brands available, and delivery service. E&S Trading's after-sales service was the retailer's stand-out criteria.

A downside is that E&S Trading is not nationally available, with showrooms primarily in Victoria, and just one in the ACT.

Retravision, Winning Appliances and Betta also scored well overall. Retravision's value for money and customer service ranked high, though its range of products and brands didn't rate quite as well as E&S Trading and Winnings.

NEED TO KNOW

- Over 3500 CHOICE supporters answered our survey on the best and worst electronics retailers in Australia.
- Appliances Online has the best online shopping experience, three surveys in a row.
- E&S Trading has the best instore shopping experience, with Retravision, Winnings and Betta not far behind.

WORST: BIG W, KMART, MYER

Department stores Big W, Kmart and Myer consistently rated lower than other stores in almost all categories in our survey. Big W had low scores for its range of products and brands and value for money, and many of our survey respondents said it was difficult to find customer service instore. Myer shoppers were not impressed with the value for money. Kmart respondents rated the range of products, customer service and layout of the store lower.

RANGE

BEST: E&S TRADING, WINNING APPLIANCES

Almost all the major electronics stores had good scores for product and range availability, but E&S Trading and Winnings topped the list.

WORST: ALDI, KMART, BIG W

While their prices are cheap, survey respondents reported that the range of products and brands at Aldi, Kmart and Big W is limited. It's also difficult to compare prices across retailers, since the products in budget department stores are often own-brand and not sold elsewhere.

VALUE FOR MONEY

BEST: E&S TRADING, RETRAVISION

In our survey, the smaller retailers E&S Trading and Retravision beat out the big-box stores such as Kmart, Big W and Myer when it came to offering value for money and more deals, specials and discounts.

WORST: BUNNINGS, HARVEY NORMAN, BIG W, OFFICEWORKS, MYER

People may decide to buy products at higher prices from some stores, such as Myer, based on service they've received in the past (even though their customer service scores in our survey are average). Some survey respondents commented that they usually only shop at Myer during sales time to get better prices.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

BEST: E&S TRADING, RETRAVISION, WINNING APPLIANCES

These three clearly come out on top in this area, coming in three percentage points ahead of Betta, which earned fourth place. Comments in our survey often referred to the staff being very helpful and knowledgeable, and if there were any problems with the products, staff members were quick to resolve them.

WORST: ALDI, KMART, BIG W

Our survey respondents complained about not being able to find staff in these stores, and when they did, the staff didn't have knowledge about the products they were selling. Some people considered these 'self-help stores', while others complained about store layout.

DELIVERY

BEST: E&S TRADING

E&S Trading received some glowing recommendations for its delivery service. A few people acknowledged that even though they had issues with delivery, they still gave the store a good rating because of the way customer service resolved the issue.

AFTER-SALES SERVICE

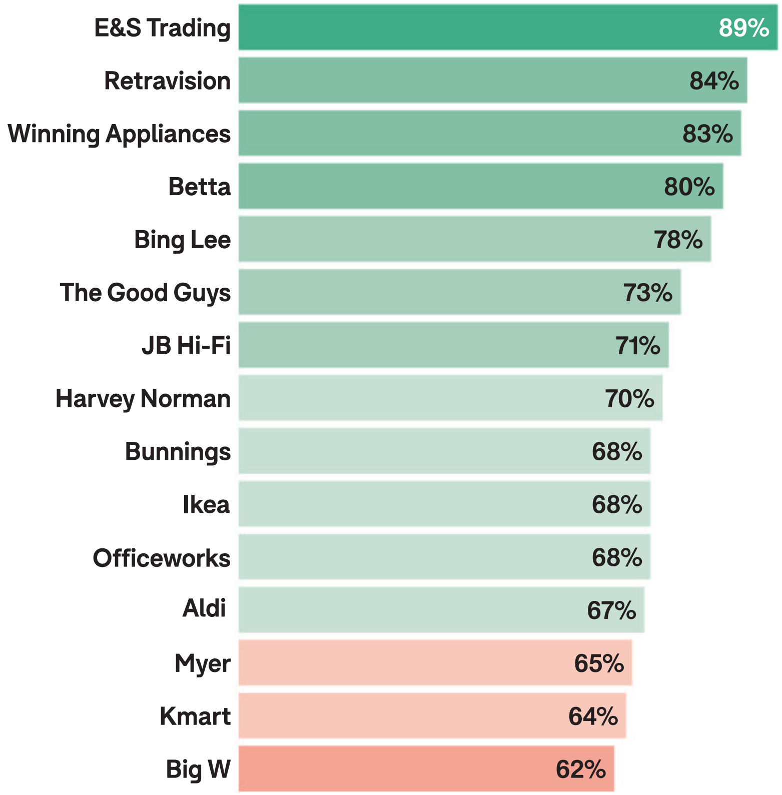
BEST: E&S TRADING

E&S Trading was by far the best performer when it came to after-sales service. Though there were no respondent comments, we can assume these results are based on staff efforts to continue to deliver good service even after customers have made a purchase.

OTHER

Commentary around the after-sales service from some retailers mentioned products failing after a short period of time, and sometimes people just didn't feel the need to return those products as they were so cheap. ▶

Best instore shopping for appliances 2024



NOTE: Betta includes both Betta Electrical and Betta Home Living.

IMAGE: GETTY

Online shopping

Despite some pandemic-fuelled growth in the past two years, online shopping is yet to eclipse shopping instore as the preferred way to buy, with over 60% of people still making the trek to physical shops to buy their new appliances and electronic goods.

But for those who do prefer the online shopping experience, our survey uncovered some strong feelings about which stores deserve your business.

OVERALL SATISFACTION

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE

Appliances Online topped every online category in our survey. We've had plenty of good feedback for Appliances Online anecdotally in recent years, and for a relatively young company (it was founded in 2005) to have gained so much ground over the past decade is an impressive thing. Though it no doubt helps that its parent company, Winning Group, has been an appliances fixture in Australia for over a century.

WORST: KOGAN

At the other end of the spectrum, Kogan scored 27 percentage points lower than Appliances Online. While there were a few comments around a good experience, mostly the feedback was negative.

RANGE

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE, AMAZON

Both Appliances Online and Amazon have a great range of products and brands available, according to our survey respondents.

WORST: MYER

When it comes to product range, there's a stark disparity of some 17 percentage points between the top rated and lowest rated electronic appliance stores. Myer has been known for having a big range of diverse products, but this seems to be changing over time.

VALUE FOR MONEY

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE

Commentary for Appliances Online reflected an emphasis on value for money. Survey respondents mentioned the company's willingness to price match, or to have competitive prices online.

WORST: HARVEY NORMAN, OFFICEWORKS

Unfortunately the same cannot be said for Harvey Norman and Officeworks. Commentary about prices seldom being discounted reflected the retailer's score in this criteria.

WEBSITE EASE OF USE

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE

Appliances Online had great feedback on its online chat assistance, and the ease of navigating its website.

While there were no terrible websites according to our respondents, Kogan scored 17 percentage points below Appliances Online, just behind Harvey Norman and Officeworks.

PAYMENT OPTIONS

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE

No store did poorly in payment options, which you'd expect for ecommerce platforms in 2024.

DELIVERY

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE

Commentary about Appliances Online's delivery was almost always favourable, with some glowing recommendations and bouquets for delivery drivers, as well as being able to select a delivery window online.

WORST: HARVEY NORMAN, THE GOOD GUYS, OFFICEWORKS, KOGAN, EBAY

The problems our survey respondents reported in relation to deliveries from Harvey Norman and The Good Guys seemed endless. There were

complaints about delivery time and cost, delivery windows of a whole day rather than hours, problems with breakages in deliveries (if products arrived at all), and installation issues. We think these stores need to take a long hard look at this aspect of their logistics. If other companies can get it right, there's definitely a skills gap at their franchises.

Officeworks, Kogan and eBay deliveries were sometimes slow, according to respondents.

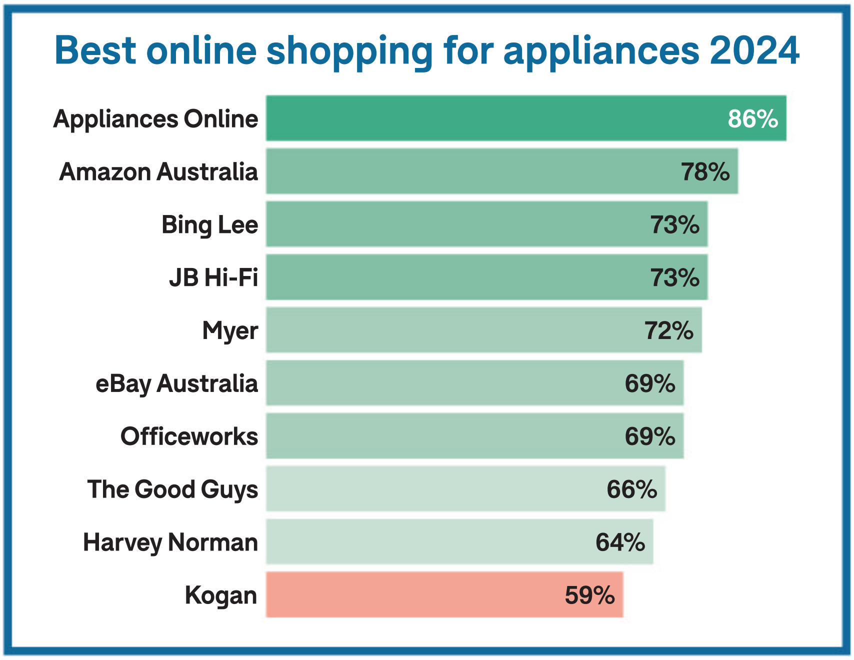
RETURNS PROCESS

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE, AMAZON AUSTRALIA

We had glowing recommendations for both of these online retailers when it comes to returns, with very few negative comments.

WORST: EBAY

We didn't receive enough survey responses to cover most of the competitors, but those we did cover were always quite a few percentage points behind Appliances Online. eBay, however, was notably lower.



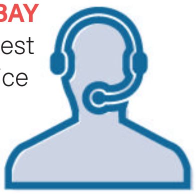
AFTER-SALES SERVICE

BEST: APPLIANCES ONLINE

The only retailer to score in the 70s for this criteria, Appliances Online rated well for after-sales service (though we didn't get enough survey responses to cover several of its competitors).

WORST: KOGAN, THE GOOD GUYS, EBAY

Kogan scored the lowest in the after-sales service category, followed by The Good Guys and eBay.



Extended warranties

INSTORE PRESSURE

We received more than a few comments around extended warranties and how salespeople push them, particularly at Harvey Norman. In recent years at CHOICE, we've researched terms and conditions on extended warranties and in many circumstances found they were useless, offering no more than the rights you already have for free under the Australian Consumer Law. Take a look at the T&Cs before you commit to anything. If you feel you've been unduly pressured into accepting an extended warranty, you can lodge a complaint with the ACCC.

ONLINE SHADINESS

We were disappointed to see how many extended warranties are being sold online using pre-selected check boxes – a deceptive web design, sometimes also called a dark pattern. The ACCC has picked up on this sort of behaviour, flagging the problem as an area where new rules are needed to protect consumers.

When even the airlines succumbed to pressure to stop pre-selecting checkboxes, you have to wonder what some online stores like Appliances Online are thinking. While it's not against the law, at CHOICE we think it's dodgy practice for any industry to use these sorts of deceptive practices to try to impose additional expenses on consumers.

Given Appliances Online comes off so well in our survey, we'd expect more from them. At least their sister site, Winning Appliances, doesn't automatically add it on at the point of purchase.

The only stores online that don't push unnecessary and poor-value extended warranties are Amazon, eBay and Myer. Having said that, Amazon tries to manipulate consumers into signing up for an Amazon Prime account on the way through, just like Kogan does with their Kogan First subscription. Other online retailers offer extended warranties but don't default to having the option ticked.

Learn more about extended warranties, and what to do if you have problems with a product or service, at **choice.com.au/yourrights**. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

Left to their own devices

Does your child need a laptop for school? **Alex Angove-Plumb** and **Peter Zaluzny** have advice on what to look for before you buy

If you're at the stage where your child needs a new laptop or tablet to use in the classroom, it can be tricky deciding what to buy.

Your child may be encouraging (pressuring) you to buy the most powerful machine around, or you may be tempted to grab whatever happens to be on sale. But before you buy, it's worth understanding exactly what your school's requirements are, and how your child will be using the device.

The best laptops for school

Almost any laptop currently available instore or online will meet the minimum requirements for schools. The starting RRP for a basic model is around $500. After that, as the price increases, so does performance (to a point). You shouldn't need to pay more than $1500 for a student laptop.

Creative tasks that involve photo and video editing, design, drawing and animation require more computing power and a better-quality screen. If your child is interested in any of these subjects or hobbies, you'll need to buy a mid- to high-end laptop.

Photo and video editing, design, drawing and animation require more computing power

A lot of schoolwork also takes place in the cloud these days, which includes educational video. A good-quality basic laptop, or affordable mid-range model, will ensure that cloud-based content and programs load and run without issues (such as lag, broken images, video that loads slowly etc.).

Ideally, a laptop should last at least four years, but software requirements can quickly outpace the performance offered by low-end laptops, especially as students move into high school. In this case, a higher upfront cost may be cheaper in the long run.

Basic laptops

Cost: ~$500–700.

In this range you're looking at low-end hardware that can handle basic tasks as required by most schools. They're capable of note taking, web browsing (including cloud-based work), working with spreadsheets, reading PDFs and video streaming. The cheapest options are pretty sluggish. You'll have to wait a bit for websites to load, software may lag and they'll have trouble running more than one program concurrently.

Mid-range laptops

Cost: ~$1000.

More than suitable for running office software, cloud-based programs and web browsers. You may also be able to do some basic image and design work (e.g. Photoshop) and maybe a bit of video and audio editing. But large file sizes in creative programs can slow a mid-range laptop down.

High-end laptops

Cost: ~$1500 and above.

A high-end laptop is worth looking into if your child is interested in creative projects. They have enough power for all but the most intensive design and video work. There should even be enough grunt for 3D-modelling/rendering and high-end professional tools such as engineering software. Laptops like these go well beyond what's needed for scholarly or office work such as online research and writing essays.

General specifications explained

There's a lot that goes into picking the right laptop for your kid's needs, but the main things to think about are:

Laptop vs tablet: A traditional laptop, also known as a clamshell, is a better option than a tablet with detachable keyboard. Performance is generally better for the price and they're easier to use.

Apple Mac vs Windows: Almost all the main software your child will be using is available for Mac and Windows. Apple products tend to be more expensive, however.

Weight: Schools recommend a maximum weight of 2kg, but there are lots of appropriate laptops that are 1.5kg or less. Thinner, lighter laptops tend to cost more.

Screen size: Most laptop screens are 13–15 inches, which is suitable for schoolwork. You can get 10- and 11-inch screens but they can feel crammed. Consider a larger screen, 15-inch or above, if your child is interested in design, image editing etc.

Battery life: Look for devices that have eight hours or more of advertised battery life, and don't go below six. Our tests found that most school-appropriate laptops have five to six hours of actual battery life (typically less than what's advertised), so your child may need to take a charging cable with them.

Storage: Accessible (usable) storage is always lower than advertised. Many low- to mid-range laptops only have a minimal amount – 100GB or less. This should be suitable for office or research work if used in conjunction with cloud storage or an external hard drive. A machine with 256GB leaves a lot more leeway and is the better option. Creative work will require a lot more storage – aim for 512GB or more. Most manufacturers or retailers may give you the option to pay a little extra for more storage.

Some laptops have SD and microSD slots to easily and cheaply add more storage. Look for one with a slot that allows the card to sit all the way in, rather than poking halfway out (it may get damaged).

RAM (aka memory): Computer programs and the operating system need memory to run. More memory equals smoother performance, broadly speaking. 4GB of RAM is the recommended minimum but 8–16GB will improve efficiency and performance. Creative work requires 8GB or more, but 32GB is overkill.

iPads and Android tablets don't have the same memory requirements. Any relatively new iPad or Android tablet (mid-range or above) will probably be fine. ▶

IMAGE: GETTY

How to save money on a laptop for school

Dropping $1000 on a laptop is a big upfront expense, not to mention the cost of accessories, software and so on. Fortunately, tech products tend to have a lot of leeway in the recommended retail price.

DISCOUNTS AND DEALS

Microsoft offers discounted prices for education use, and some retailers, such as Harvey Norman and JB Hi-Fi, offer education BYOD discounts for specific devices. Key sales periods such as end-of-financial-year (EOFY) and Black Friday sales are also a great time to pick up discounted models if you can plan that far ahead of the new school year.

BUNDLES AND HAGGLING

Retailers love an upsell. You can more than likely talk down the overall cost if you bundle your device with some accessories and programs in the one sale.

You can more than likely talk down the overall cost if you bundle your device with some accessories

Otherwise, ask the salesperson what their best price is and push for a better discount if you're feeling confident. Remember to shop around and bust out the old price-match too.

REFURBISHED COMPUTERS

A number of manufacturers, such as Apple and Dell, sell refurbished models direct to public at a discount. They may be slightly older but should still have specs suitable for schoolwork. Check all the info before buying just to be sure.

SECOND-HAND SHOPPING

You might be able to find a cheap, used laptop online, but be extra careful of private purchases – always inspect the goods carefully and try them out before you buy. Also, make sure it has been factory reset or you may find yourself with a laptop locked to the previous owner. And look up the make and model online to confirm its specifications match your needs.

Avoid devices that are more than a few years old. Performance probably won't be up to scratch and they may not work with the latest software required for school. Older operating systems don't receive regular, or any, security updates after a certain point.

WHAT IF YOU CAN'T AFFORD A NEW DEVICE FOR YOUR CHILD?

If you aren't in a financial position to purchase a new or second-hand device, or you don't currently own one that fits your school's specifications, approach your school. There may be programs or devices available for loan.

BYOD policies may also have support schemes that can partly cover the cost of a new laptop. State governments can also offer heavily discounted or free one-off software licences to students for some apps.

Manufacturers and retailers can also help. Retailers may provide student discounts when asked, for example, even if they aren't advertised. Microsoft's Shape the Future program allows qualifying primary and secondary educational establishments to buy devices with discounted Windows licences.

Most charities can point you in the right direction as well. There are a number of third-party organisations that refurbish older, donated laptops for people in need, including students. These are either available for free or sold at a heavy discount.

And if you have a device that you no longer require, consider donating

it to one of these organisations. You could really help a family out.

Do I need insurance?

A laptop or tablet can take a battering in the school bag, even if you do have good protection for it (which is essential). Kids are also prone to losing things. If you've spent a fair whack on a device, it's worth looking at insurance.

You can insure your laptop by:

- taking out portable contents cover on your home insurance, or
- buying single-item insurance.

Most insurers offer portable contents cover as an optional extra; some include it by default. It usually comes with sublimits that can be anywhere from $500 to $15,000. If the replacement cost of your laptop is more than your sublimit, then you can usually opt to list it on your policy for an amount of your choosing (though this of course comes with a higher premium).

You can get specialty insurance for your laptop direct from an insurer, from the retail store where you buy the laptop, or from an 'on-demand' insurance provider, which is typically an app on your phone where you can turn the insurance cover on and off.

POLICY EXCLUSIONS

Yes, you do need to read the fine print. Pay particular attention to who is 'insured' by the policy. If it's your name on the policy, will the laptop be covered if other family members such as your children take it to school?

And like travel insurance, portable contents cover will generally exclude cover for loss or theft of items out of your direct sight in a place accessible to the public. Depending on how the insurer interprets this, it may include a workplace or a classroom. So if the laptop goes missing from the classroom while your child is looking in the other direction, some insurers may deny a subsequent claim for loss.

> **Internal hard drives can fill up quickly, especially if your child is doing creative work**

Accessories you may need

The laptop is just the first of many expenses you'll likely need to budget for. A few laptop accessories, while optional, are beneficial and may also be required:

- **Carry case/laptop case:** These are inexpensive and will help protect the laptop from the general recklessness of youth.
- **External hard drive:** Internal hard drives can fill up quickly, especially if your child is doing creative work. A one- to two-terabyte drive should provide enough extra storage to safely back up files should the laptop get damaged or lost.
- **Keyboard and mouse:** The keyboard and mouse on a laptop can be small, cramped and difficult to use for long periods. A USB or Bluetooth keyboard and mouse can be more comfortable.
- **Software subscriptions:** Lots of software is subscription-based nowadays, such as Adobe Creative Cloud. You may need to factor in these ongoing fees depending on your child's needs. ■

IMAGES: GETTY

Talkin' 'bout my generation

Whether you're a newly minted young driver or you have years of experience, **Uta Mihm** and **Daniel Graham** can help you choose the right car insurance policy

In the world of car insurance, experience on the road is highly valued. This means that younger, less experienced drivers will generally be paying higher premiums, while older drivers will usually be enjoying a slight discount.

But there are large differences in the premiums and conditions car insurers have, so it pays to shop around.

Here are some tips and useful information if you're shopping for insurance for someone under 25 or 60 and over. For our latest full review of car insurance policies, see *CHOICE* Oct 24.

Drivers under 25

If you're under 25, you'll be slugged with the highest possible premiums for car insurance. That means it's very important to choose the right level of cover for your needs.

Third-party insurance covers damage done to other people's cars and property, while a **third-party fire and theft policy** offers additional cover for theft or fire damage.

Comprehensive policies offer all these protections, plus they cover damage to your car caused by natural disasters, vandalism and accidents, even if you're at fault.

Comprehensive insurance policies are more popular because they offer more cover, but third-party policies are a lot cheaper and might make more sense if you're a young driver with an older car that's worth less – at least until you have more driving experience and qualify for cheaper premiums.

> Third-party policies might make more sense for a young driver with an older, lower-value car

CHEAPEST INSURERS FOR YOUNG DRIVERS

Third-party insurance might be the best choice for some young drivers, but if you drive an expensive car and want to take out comprehensive car insurance, the cheapest insurers for young drivers on average across Australia are Rollin', RACT, RAC and NRMA.

Note: Our price ratings are based on average premiums. They may not be reflective of your situation. We recommend you get at least five quotes, starting with your regular insurer, and look at policy inclusions, features and excesses.

DRIVING A PARENT'S CAR

Learner drivers

It's important that parents talk to their car insurer first to make sure their car is covered before they use it to start teaching a learner driver.

Some car insurers, including Budget Direct, require adding a learner driver to the policy, while others like NRMA, AAMI and GIO don't require any changes to the car insurance for supervising a learner driver.

If the learner driver is the registered owner of the car, the car insurance policy needs to be in their name.

Provisional drivers

If you're a P-plater and only drive your parent's car occasionally, check with the car insurer if you're covered or whether you need to be listed on their policy.

If you have your own car or you're the main driver of a parent's car, then the car needs to be insured in your name. If you insure it in your parent's name to save money and not because you're the primary driver, this could be seen as insurance fraud, meaning your car insurance policy could be invalid and your claims might be knocked back.

Large excesses

If you have an accident when driving your parent's car, you may be up for a large additional excess. There are a number of excesses that may apply, depending on your policy, including:

- standard excess
- young driver excess – can apply to drivers up to 24 years of age and may be more expensive for drivers under the age of 21 (this often does not apply to learner drivers)
- inexperienced driver excess – usually for drivers with less than two years' driving experience on a full licence (time as a learner driver or P-plate driver doesn't count). It may only be applied if the driver is over 25 (when a young driver excess no longer applies)
- unlisted driver excess
- learner driver excess.

More than one excess might apply. For example, if a 20-year-old has an accident, is not listed on the policy and is still on their Ps, an excess of up to $2800 can apply, which might include:

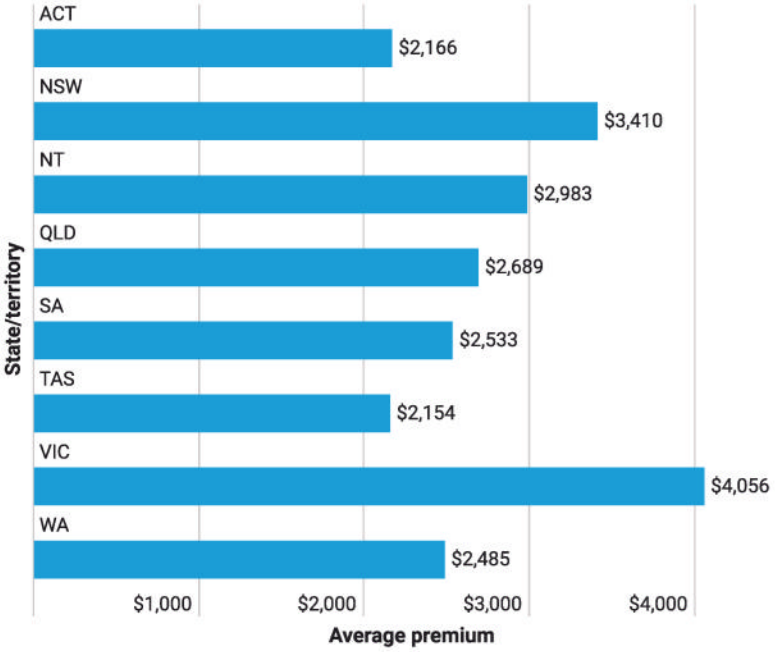
- $800 standard excess
- $1200 young driver excess
- $800 unlisted driver excess. ▶

IMAGE: GETTY

How to save on car insurance for young drivers

- Shop around – premiums for listed young drivers and young drivers driving their own car can vary widely.
- Choose a car insurance policy recommended by CHOICE – it'll be cheaper and have better features (see *CHOICE* Oct 24).
- Buy your car insurance online to make use of online discounts.
- Don't buy a high-performance car as it'll be more expensive to insure.
- Pay your full annual premium if you can – some insurers charge you more if you pay monthly.
- Don't modify your car.
- Sometimes you can get discounted premiums if you install an anti-theft device such as an alarm or immobiliser.
- Some insurers, like AAMI, will give you a discount if you do their skilled driver training course.
- Increase your excess – but be aware of any extra young driver excesses that may apply.
- Depending on the value of your car, it may be worth taking out third-party cover instead of more-expensive comprehensive car insurance.

Average premium for young drivers



Average premiums based on a market-representative sample of 43,621 quotes collected in October 2024. Customer profiles varied by vehicle, address, and driver details, with the primary driver aged 25 and under.

Drivers 60-plus

Car insurers value experienced drivers, which is why premiums get cheaper the older you get. But that changes once you hit 70, when premiums increase slightly again, although they're still lower than the premiums for under 25s. Even with lower premiums, car insurance can be a big expense.

When you're retiring or working fewer hours, saving on car insurance becomes more important than before.

PAYING MONTHLY

Paying your insurance monthly helps with budgeting. Many insurers will charge you more if you can't pay your annual premium upfront, but not all do. Some of the insurers that let you pay your premium monthly at no extra cost include Allianz, CGU, National Seniors, NRMA and RAA.

LOW KM DISCOUNT

If you don't need to drive to work, you might drive your car less. Some insurers offer a pay as you drive discount for low kilometres. These include:

- AAMI
- Apia
- Australian Seniors
- Budget Direct
- Coles
- GIO
- Suncorp
- Woolworths Everyday.

Not all insurers advertise their low-kilometre discount, so it's always worth asking.

OVER-50S ONLY

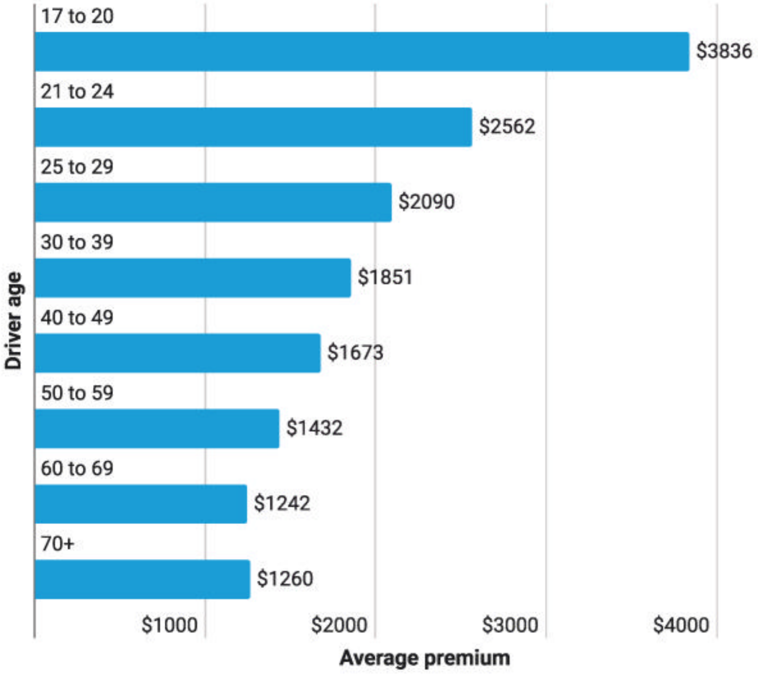
There are three car insurers that sell car insurance exclusively to over-50s. When shopping around, it might be a good idea to include them to see if they offer value for money for you.

- Apia (Suncorp): For-profit, Australian-owned.
- Australian Seniors (Hollard): for-profit, foreign-owned.
- National Seniors Australia (Allianz): nonprofit and Australian-owned (though Allianz is neither).

How to save on car insurance for seniors and age pensioners

- Shop around – premiums for car insurance vary widely.
- Choose a policy recommended by CHOICE – you'll get better features and save money (see *CHOICE* Oct 24).
- Buy your car insurance online to make use of online discounts.
- If you can, store your car in a secured, locked garage. Sometimes you can also save by installing an anti-theft device such as an alarm or immobiliser.
- If you have a seniors card, mention it – some insurers give seniors card holders a discount, for example RAA, Australian Seniors and RACQ (home and contents insurance only). You may also be eligible for discounts on car registration and driver's licence renewal.
- If you can, restrict the age of the people who can drive your vehicle. Insurers may reduce your premium if you restrict your car insurance to drivers 25 and over, for example.
- Increase your excess.
- Depending on the value of your car, it may be worth only taking out third-party cover instead of comprehensive car insurance.

How much does car insurance cost?



Average premiums based on a market-representative sample of 309,619 quotes collected in October 2024. Quotes for a wide variety of customer profiles were collected at the insurers' default excess, then adjusted to a standardised excess to permit like-for-like comparisons.

Driving restrictions for seniors

In the section below we outline state-by-state restrictions and conditions for older drivers on a standard driver's licence. There are different rules depending on what type of licence you hold.

Regardless of your age, for all states you need to notify your motor authority if you develop a medical condition that could affect your driving. You may be required to undergo medical assessment and driving tests.

> You need to notify your motor authority if you develop a medical condition that could affect your driving

RESTRICTIONS FOR SENIORS BY STATE

	Age from which older driver rules apply	Medical assessment	Driving test
ACT	75	From 75 years of age – annually	na
NSW	70	From 70 years of age if recommended by doctor, otherwise from 75 years of age – annually	From 75 years of age if recommended by doctor, otherwise from 85 years of age – every two years (B)
NT	na (A)	If requested by a health professional	na
Qld	75	From 75 years of age – annually (every 13 months)	na
SA	75	From 75 year of age, self-assessment – annually	If requested by doctor
Tas	na	Only if you receive a request from Registrar of Motor Vehicles	Only if requested after medical assessment
Vic	na	na	na
WA	80	From 80 years of age – annually	If requested by doctor

NOTES (A) Vision test every five years for drivers of any age. **(B)** Drivers aged 85 years and over who don't want to do a driving test can instead choose a modified licence with distance restrictions that will allow them to drive in their local area to be able to do their shopping and attend community activities and medical appointments. Greater distances are allowed if you live in a country area.

OTHER CONDITIONS MAY APPLY

The state-by-state breakdown above is a general guide, but it's also important to note:

- Stricter rules may apply for a heavy vehicle licence.
- Different rules apply if you have a medical condition such as dementia or are on any medication that could affect your ability to drive.
- Many drivers have conditions on their licence such as the requirement for an eye test or vehicle modifications for people with a disability. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

Pet project

Is pet insurance worth it, or are you better off putting aside savings to cover the cost of veterinary care? **Marg Rafferty** and **Daniel Graham** look at your options

Having a new pet is exciting, but being a pet owner means considering the veterinary costs you're likely to have in the months and years ahead.

According to ASIC's Moneysmart website, pet owners can expect to pay upwards of $3200 a year to care for a dog and $1715 a year to care for a cat, and that doesn't include the cost of veterinary bills should your pet be injured or become ill.

Knowing that veterinary costs can quickly add up, some pet owners choose pet insurance to give them peace of mind should large or unexpected bills arise. However, amid ongoing cost-of-living pressures, many owners may see the high cost of pet insurance premiums as an expense they can do without. In that case, could self-insurance – putting aside savings to cover unexpected costs – be a better idea?

> **"Premium payments can be easier to manage than sudden large vet bills"**

Pros and cons of pet insurance

According to the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), financial protection and peace of mind are just two of the benefits of pet insurance. Access to advanced care and its use as a budgeting aid are others. "Regular premium payments can be easier to manage than sudden large vet bills," they say.

CHOICE has been closely monitoring the costs and restrictions of pet insurance over the years and our insurance experts note that there have been improvements to policies in recent years. "The pet insurance market has come a fair way since 2019, when we gave the whole sector a Shonky for their uncompetitive rules around pre-existing conditions," says CHOICE pet insurance expert Daniel Graham.

"You can now get cover for pre-existing conditions after serving a waiting period, but only if the condition doesn't flare up during that time. That compares poorly to human health insurance, where you just need to serve a waiting period to get cover," he says.

But like most insurance products, pet insurance can be complicated, which makes it difficult to figure out whether a policy represents good value.

"Almost all policies have an annual benefit limit, which caps what the insurer will pay for treatment your pet gets over the policy period. Limits range from $5000 to $30,000, but of course with all things insurance it's never that simple," says Graham.

"Most insurers also place limits on how much of each bill they will cover. Some will only rebate you as little as 60% of the bill, although 80% is more common. So if you have a $20,000 limit with 80% cover, you'll be at least $4000 out of pocket by the time you've claimed the full annual limit."

You should also consider what is covered and what features are excluded. Here are some factors to consider:

- Most standard policies won't cover routine check-ups and vaccinations. If you want coverage for these things, make sure you choose a policy that offers this cover and be aware premiums will be higher.
- If you have an older animal it can be hard to get cover – only a handful of policies are available to animals over eight years of age and these will usually only cover accidents, not illness.
- Remember there will be an excess to pay with most policies, so you'll still be out of pocket if your pet requires veterinary care, and many policies have a $300 limit on veterinary costs.
- Be aware that many policies will only cover a portion of the cost of any vet bills, and that percentage may get smaller as your pet ages.

Pros and cons of self-insuring

"In certain situations, self-insuring, or regularly putting money aside to cover potential future veterinary costs, can be a viable alternative to pet insurance," an AVA spokesperson tells us. Benefits include retaining access to and control over funds when needed, and if pets remain healthy, some owners will find regular saving more cost-effective than shelling out for insurance premiums.

On the other hand, veterinary emergencies can be unexpected and costly. Without sufficient savings, pet owners might struggle to cover all the expenses required to treat their pet.

There will be an excess to pay with any policy, so you'll still be out of pocket if your pet requires veterinary care

IMAGES: GETTY

(Though bear in mind that even if you have insurance, you're still likely to be hit with upfront and out-of-pocket costs should an emergency arise.)

Another downside is that building up significant savings takes time. Even one large vet bill could leave your savings depleted for the next unexpected illness or accident.

And you need to be disciplined. Cost-of-living pressures and other financial emergencies may mean your savings are needed elsewhere and it can be tempting to spend money saved for possible future veterinary bills.

How much do you need to self-insure?

If you do decide to self-insure your pet, a good starting point when thinking about how much to save is to consider regular vet care costs such as annual vaccinations and check-ups. Bear in mind you'll also need to pay for these services even if you have insurance, as most policies won't cover them. You'll also need to set aside funds for emergencies and illnesses.

COSTS OF COMMON VETERINARY TREATMENTS

Here are the average costs for some common veterinary treatments according to PetSure's *2024 Pet Health Monitor* report.

- Foreign body ingestion (dogs): $1064 without surgery and $5067 with surgery.
- Foreign body ingestion (cats): $1808 without surgery, $4951 with surgery.
- Cruciate ligament surgery: $5500.
- Hip replacement: $12,300 per hip.
- Heart conditions: $1446 in dogs, $1409 in cats.
- Kidney disease: $1589 (cats).
- Cancer in dogs: $1514 without surgery, $2812 with surgery.
- Cancer in cats: $1931 without surgery, $3600 with surgery.*

Again, even if you have insurance there will likely be gaps and excesses ▶

to pay. It's also worth noting that many policies will have maximum benefits of $10,000–30,000, with some paying as little as $5000. This is why it's imperative to check the limits of a policy before you buy, to ensure it's right for you. See our table on page 43 to compare policies.

AVERAGE COSTS JUST THE START

In all of the examples given above, maximum treatment costs can be many times greater than these averages.

For example, the highest treatment cost for toxin and foreign body ingestion in cats was $19,444 and in dogs it was $41,671. And, as painful as it is to consider, you should also factor in the cost of euthanasia, which may be required if your pet's quality of life deteriorates and treatments aren't an option. You may also decide you want to factor in burial or cremation costs. These can also cost hundreds of dollars.

When deciding whether or not to self-insure, it's vital that you also factor in the pet's breed and age. Studies have shown that some breeds are more susceptible to certain conditions. Pet Sure's *2024 Pet Health Monitor* gives the example of golden retrievers, which can be prone to eye problems; miniature dachshunds, which could suffer spinal disease; and German shepherds, which could experience arthritis and gastrointestinal complaints.

Understanding the particular risks your pet might face can help you budget accordingly

Understanding the particular risks your pet might face can help you budget accordingly, and your vet should be able to assist with these calculations. You should also consider these issues when choosing pet insurance so you can be sure your policy covers the problems your pet might encounter.

What pet owners say

Many pet owners believe pet insurance to be good value. For Teresa, whose three-year-old labrador developed allergies early in life, insurance has more than paid for itself. "It's definitely helped us afford allergy treatments," she says.

For Samir and his family, the value of pet insurance became clear when their aging German shepherd, Jasper, developed a condition that required regular treatment at a specialised vet. While Jasper was uninsured for his first seven years, the family wanted to be sure they could cover vet bills as he grew older, and were glad they did take out insurance. "We realised how lucky we were to have the insurance. We would not be able to afford the bills without it," he says.

Other pet owners decided insurance wasn't such good value. Wendy looked at getting insurance for her young cat but decided it wasn't worth the cost. She calculated that for her cats she'd have spent roughly $35,000 on insurance in the 13 years since she first investigated the option, assuming the premiums didn't rise, which of course they would have.

"I've maybe spent $8000 on vet bills over their lives so far and $5000 of that was a three-day emergency stay, so at this point I'm significantly ahead."

Chris, whose cat Adi was already a senior when he adopted him, also believes pet insurance would not have been good value.

"I've never had pet insurance, and have had to pay out a fair bit for various treatments – probably $2500 over the past four years. I suspect I probably wouldn't have been ahead overall with pet insurance, as he was an old boy when I got him – about 14 years old – and I expect policies would have been limited and premiums high. So I don't really regret not having insurance," he says.

Pet insurance: What you need to know

If you decide that a pet insurance product is the best option for you, the next step is choosing a policy. These usually fall into two categories: accident-only cover, and comprehensive accident and illness cover. While pet insurance covers surgery, hospitalisation and medicines, in many cases dental care, vaccinations and preventative treatment aren't included.

In a typical claim, you'll pay an excess (around $100), as well as a co-payment (usually 20–35% of the vet bill) and your insurer will cover the rest. Excesses are usually charged per condition, so if you need to make multiple claims for the same condition, you'll only pay the excess once a year.

AMOUNT OF COVER

You should approach this from two angles. Firstly, consider the maximum annual benefit a policy offers – the total amount the insurer will pay out each year. The second thing to look at is the range of features on offer. Identify policies with features you're likely to need. Will your pug's hereditary conditions be covered? Do you really need public liability insurance for your chihuahua?

Annual benefit levels range from $3000 to unlimited. Many policies set sub-limits for the treatment of tick paralysis, dental illness and cruciate ligament injury.

Treatment costs vary between animal and breed. For example, treatment for tick paralysis – a common and serious ailment among animals in the bush – might cost up to several thousand dollars if emergency hospitalisation is required. Consult with your vet about the particular health risks your pet is likely to face.

Dental illness is a common exclusion, so it's also good to speak to your vet about that. If your pet's breed is susceptible to tooth problems, you should consider a policy with a high limit for dental illness. Some policies allow optional cover for dental illness, if it isn't covered as standard.

PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

One major issue with pet insurance is that you could be locked into your current policy if your pet develops a chronic health condition. If you decide to switch insurers, any pre-existing conditions that aren't fully cured won't be covered. A pre-existing condition refers to any illness or injury your pet had before you took out the policy or switched to a new one.

Most insurers will cover new customers for pre-existing conditions if those conditions are fully cured (the pet will usually have to be symptom-free for a period of time), while chronic conditions are not covered.

Examples of pre-existing health issues that could get covered are:

- your puppy has gastro and develops gastro again a few years later for a different reason ▸

Can you get an old dog a new policy?

If you're shopping around to insure a pet older than eight years, you'll find yourself restricted to just a handful of comprehensive policies or seniors' products and accident-only policies.

The reason given by insurers is that this keeps premiums under control and encourages pet owners to get insured when their animal is young and healthy (so your premiums can subsidise older pets' healthcare needs).

This restricts the customer's ability to switch (while the insurer can change the policy with each annual renewal). Conceivably, the policy you sign your kitten up to might look very different to the one covering your old moggy 15 years later.

IMAGES: GETTY

- a new unrelated injury on a previously broken leg that was healed
- a different type of lump after a previously benign (not cancerous) lump has been successfully removed.

As long as the new health issue is not related to or caused by the pre-existing health condition, and other conditions are met, the illness would be covered in most cases.

REAL-TIME CLAIMING

Pet insurance is catching up with other insurances when it comes to claims handling. Previously your only option was to pay the entire vet bill and submit a claim to the insurer. After several days they would send you a rebate, but in the meantime you could be thousands of dollars out of pocket.

Fetch and Petsure (which underwrites most of the brands in our review) are two insurers that now have systems for on-the-spot claims processing, if your vet clinic chooses to participate.

- **Petsure** claims its GapOnly system can assess a claim in around five minutes while you're still at the vet clinic. Once the claim is approved, you simply pay your share of the bill.
- **Fetch** claims a 15-minute handling time with its Fast Claims system, which you need to opt into when you first sign up. As with GapOnly, Fetch pays the vet directly and you pay the gap.

Both services are available during the insurer's operating hours; outside these you can submit a regular claim.

While not every insurer has real-time claiming, some will still make direct payments to the vet. This may be on a case-by-case basis, so check with both the insurer and your vet before treatment.

Many insurers now offer their customers free telehealth vet services

TELEHEALTH SERVICES

Many insurers now offer their customers free telehealth vet services. In most cases you can text or call a vet at any time, who can give you general advice or talk through concerns you have. It can be a no-cost and stress-free alternative to a local vet visit, although the providers make it clear that their service is a complement to, not a substitute for, in-person treatment.

Choosing a policy

Use our table at right to find a pet insurance policy that's right for you. For space reasons we've included one plan per insurer – we've selected the policy with the highest level of cover, but the table isn't ordered by performance. The policies all offer:

- cover for cats and dogs
- comprehensive cover for illnesses (with the exception of dental illness, which is often limited to certain conditions)
- cover for accidental injury (although some limit cover to a list of common accidents, such as bone fracture or snakebite)
- total cover amount of at least $12,000 a year.

Product	Issued by	Max. age for new cover (yr)	Portion of bill covered	Maximum annual limit ($)	Illness	Injury	Dental illness	Alternative therapies	Routine care	Telehealth	Quick claims	Direct payment to vet
	SPECIFICATIONS											
Australian Seniors Top Cover	Petsure	8	80%	12,000	✓	(D)		Op	Op		✓	✓
Bow Wow Meow Nose-To-Tail Cover	Petsure	8	70, 80 or 90%	30,000	✓	✓	$2000 (Op) (E)	$2000 (E)	Op	✓	✓	✓
Budget Direct Plus	Auto & General	8	80%	25,000	✓	✓			Op			
Bupa Ultimate	Petsure	8	80%	20,000	✓	(D)	$500 (Op)	$1000 (Op)	Op	✓	✓	✓
CBA Plus Cover	Petsure	8	80 or 90%	30,000	✓	(D)	$2000 (Op) (E)	$2000 (E)	Op	✓	✓	✓
Coles Premium	Guild	8	80 or 100%	15,000	✓	✓	$800 (Op)		Op			✓
Everyday Insurance Comprehensive	Petsure	8	80%	30,000	✓	(D)			Op	✓	✓	✓
Fetch Pet Insurance	Pacific International	9	80, 90 or 100%	30,000	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Guardian Platinum	Petsure	8	80%	12,000	✓	(D)		Op	Op		✓	✓
Guide Dogs Premium Care	Petsure	8	85%	20,000	✓	(D)		Op	Op		✓	✓
HCF Pet Premium	Petsure	8	80%	12,000	✓	(D)	$2000 (Op)	Op		✓	✓	✓
Knose Pet Insurance	Pacific International	8	70, 80 or 90%	25,000	✓	✓	Op	Op	(F)	✓		✓
Kogan Pet Luxury Cover	Petsure	8	80% (A)	15,000	✓	(D)		Op	Op	✓	✓	✓
Mad Paws Deluxe Plan	Pacific International	9	70, 80 or 90%	15,000	✓	✓	$500		Op			
Medibank Pet Max	Petsure	8	90%	30,000	✓	(D)	$2000	$2000	Op	✓	✓	✓
Pet Circle Pet Insurance	Pacific International	8	70, 80 or 90%	30,000 (B)	✓	✓	Op (E)	Op (E)		✓		
Pet Insurance Australia Major Medical Cover	Petsure	8	80%	30,000	✓	(D)		✓	Op	✓	✓	✓
Petbarn Total	Petsure	6	100% (A)	No limit (C)	✓	(D)	$750	$500			✓	✓
Petcover Superior	Sovereign	7	100% (A)	20,000 (B)	✓	✓	✓	$4000				✓
Petinsurance.com.au Platinum Cover	Petsure	8	80%	30,000	✓	(D)	$1000	Op	Op	✓	✓	✓
PetsOnMe Deluxe Plan	Pacific International	8	80%	15,000	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Petsy Pet Protection Plus	Pacific International	8	80 or 90%	25,000	✓	✓	Op (E)	Op (E)				✓
Prime Sovereign	Petsure	8	85%	14,000	✓	(D)	$2000	Op	Op		✓	✓
RAC Pet Insurance	RACQ	8	80%	12,000	✓	✓		Op	Op			
RACQ Pet Insurance	RACQ	8	80%	12,000	✓	✓		Op	Op			
Real Insurance Premium	Petsure	8	80%	12,000	✓	(D)		Op	Op		✓	✓
RSPCA Ultimate Plus	Petsure	8	80%	20,000	✓	(D)		Op	Op		✓	✓
Trupanion Pet Insurance	Hollard	13	90%	No limit	✓	✓	✓	Op			✓	✓
Vets Choice Elite	Guild	8	80%	15,000	✓	✓	$800 (Op)		Op			✓

TABLE NOTES Op Optional. Cover is available up to the limit given, otherwise up to the annual limit. **(A)** Benefit drops to 65% as the pet ages. **(B)** Lower for cats. **(C)** No overall policy limit, but almost every claimable condition falls under a combined $1500 "condition limit". The policy covers about 35 other conditions that have separate limits between $500 and $6000. **(D)** Only covers a limited list of injuries. **(E)** Bundled with other optional extras, with a combined sublimit if applicable. **(F)** Insurer sells pet care plans separately, rather than as an insurance add-on. Compare more policies at **choice.com.au/petinsurance**. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

Tea & toast

They may look good on your kitchen bench, but is it a good idea to buy a matching kettle and toaster? **Alice Richard** spills the tea

While there are plenty of individual toasters and kettles that'll start your day off right, you can take your kitchen appliance game to the next level with a matching pair – bought either as a set, or individually from the same collection.

Is it better to mix and match brands to find the best performers? Or is a matching set going to bring balance to your kitchen? We'll talk you through the pros and cons of buying aesthetically pleasing kitchen appliances.

Perfectly paired?

You may be inclined to stick with matching products if they have very distinctive patterns (for example, a 'diamond' design on a kettle) or unique colours or metallic shades to go with your kitchen. But if you opt for classic styles, you might find a close enough match for your kettle and toaster while still having the freedom to buy the brand and model you prefer.

"Stainless steel items are usually similar looking so you needn't worry too much about having the same brand," says CHOICE appliance expert Kim Gilmour.

"Or you could get different branded appliances that are inspired by the same look, and are cheaper and/or better performing."

Which brings us to the next point – looks aren't everything.

The chances of finding the perfect kettle and toaster in the same set are slim, but not impossible

"Think of quality as well," says Gilmour. "If a toaster looks good but doesn't rate well, are you prepared to sacrifice style for functionality?"

Appliance purists will be inclined to choose performance over prettiness. "Performance is the most important thing to me," says CHOICE expert tester Adrian Lini. "I would always aim to get a simple design like stainless steel or black so that it'll match with everything."

PROS

- **Discounts:** Because you're buying two products at once, you might receive a discount off the recommended retail price that you won't get if you purchase separately.
- **Aesthetics:** This is an obvious one! Matching appliances can really lift the look of your kitchen and complement your interior design. For aesthetes, this is more than worth spending a little extra money on.
- **Fewer options:** For the indecisive among us, this can actually make life easier. When you have your heart set on a matching pair, that will rule out a fair chunk of the market – which will make it easier for you to choose. (Well, as easy as these things get for those who struggle to make decisions!)

CONS

- **The trade-off:** To buy the kettle of your dreams in a set, you might need to settle for a less-than-perfect toaster – or vice versa. The chances of finding the perfect kettle and toaster in the same set are slim, but not impossible.
- **Changing fashions:** That matching retro pastel set with rose gold finishes might be fashionable now, but what about in a few years' time? You don't want to have to replace your appliances every couple of years to keep up with trends.
- **Availability:** If one appliance dies before the other, it could be difficult to find a replacement, especially if they were sold as a set. You also might not find the same model if that particular series is discontinued.
- **Less choice:** If you're committed to a particular brand or range, then that limits your options. If, for instance, you really love that Smeg kettle and want to have a matching set, then that will significantly decrease the pool you have to choose from. Whereas if you're happy to just go with a kettle and toaster that are approximately the same style, then you'll be spoilt for choice and can find exactly the right appliance for your needs. Of course, that does mean you'll have to do more research! ▶

If one appliance dies before the other, it could be difficult to find a replacement

Questions to ask yourself

What size do you really need? Don't buy the bigger set if you don't really need it – a four-slice toaster for a two-person household might just be overkill. Some brands will offer a two-slice and a four-slice toaster in the same range, so you can choose whichever one works best for your situation.

What's most important to you? If you're a coffee or tea nerd, then buying a kettle with special features should be high on your list of priorities – but perhaps a toaster is less important to you. If you're just using your kettle to make basic cups of tea throughout the day, but you have a family of six to feed every morning for breakfast, then a good toaster is probably more useful.

How important is it to you to have a matching set? So important that you'd sacrifice performance for aesthetics? (No judgement – it's a totally valid choice.) Or would you be happy with a kettle and toaster that are similar enough that you probably won't notice in a week or two? Or do you just want the best performing kettle and toaster, regardless of whether they match?

IMAGES: GETTY

COUPLE GOALS

Pairing up? See our toaster review, p48

77%
Kettle: KitchenAid Electric Kettle 1.7 Litres 5KEK1835AOB

75%
Toaster: KitchenAid 2 Slice Toaster 5AKMT223OB

Both recommended by CHOICE experts, these two KitchenAid appliances are great performers. The kettle in particular impressed our testers, who couldn't find any bad points about its performance to mention. Depending on your decor, you can select from a range of colours, including red, cream, white, black and grey. These products aren't cheap, but if you're looking for a kettle and toaster set that deliver on performance and aesthetics, then this is it.

'TIL DEATH DO US PART

77%
Kettle: Dualit Classic 72790

70%
Toaster: Dualit NewGen 2 Slice Classic Toaster D2VMHA AU (4-slice version $525)

If you're looking to make your kitchen more sustainable, you could opt for a Dualit duo. The 2-slice NewGen toaster in chrome looks very neat with the Classic kettle, while the 4-slice can match with the kettle in either copper or chrome. The kettle has a replaceable element, designed to extend its lifespan, while the toasters are designed to be fully repairable (read more on p48), so if you invest in this set you can expect it to last a long time. In terms of performance, while the kettle impressed our testers, the toasters fell slightly short of the mark and missed out on a recommendation. But if you're looking for a sustainable combo, this is still a good option.

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Anko	C
Big W	C
Breville	D
DeLonghi	D
Kambrook	D
KitchenAid	D
Morphy Richards	B
Russell Hobbs	D
Sunbeam	F

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

			PERFORMANCE							SPECIFICATIONS				
Recommended		**Price ($)**	**CHOICE Expert Rating (%)**	**Ease of use score (%)**	**Noise score (%)**	**Boil performance score (%)**	**Energy efficiency score (%)**	**Noise (dBA)**	**Boiling time (min:sec)**	**Material**	**Lid type**	**Weight when empty (kg)**	**Capacity (L)**	**Warranty (years)**
	Breville The Smart Kettle BKE825 (A)	200	82	84	80	77	84	54	3:12	SS (B)	H	1.0	1.7	2
✓	**Russell Hobbs** Montana Kettle RHK142	70	81	84	80	71	86	53	3:22	SS	H	0.9	1.7	2
✓	**Russell Hobbs** Quiet Kettle RHK26330	60	81	85	80	69	81	50	3:25	SS	H	1.0	1.7	2
✓	**Healthy Choice** 1.7L Glass Kettle GK700	70	78	87	70	66	85	55	3:30	G	H	1.2	1.7	1
✓	**Big W** Contempo Kettle 1.7 Litre Plastic K511CN	15	77	85	70	65	84	60	3:31	P	H	0.8	1.7	2
✓	**KitchenAid** Electric Kettle 1.7L 5KEK1701AAC	219	77	82	70	76	87	60	3:13	SS	H	1.4	1.7	2
✓	**Nero** Urban 1.7L Kettle 740088	80	77	83	70	72	88	56	3:20	SS	H	0.9	1.7	1
✓	**Dualit** Classic 72790	249	77	82	70	74	86	59	3:16	SS	H	1.2	1.7	2
✓	**Russell Hobbs** Brooklyn Kettle RHK92COP	110	77	84	70	66	85	59	3:30	SS (B)	H	0.9	1.7	2
✓	**Anko** 1.7 Litre Fluted Kettle JK-154-2200	35	76	83	70	64	85	59	3:33	P	R	0.9	1.7	1
✓	**Kambrook** Pour With Ease 1.7L BPA Free Kettle KKE280	45	76	85	70	62	81	59	3:37	P	H	0.6	1.7	2
✓	**Russell Hobbs** Paddington Kettle 18941	60	76	83	70	62	87	58	3:37	SS	H	0.9	1.7	2
	Breville Crystal Luxe BJE765BTR	249	74	85	60	77	82	62	3:11	G	H	1.6	1.7	2
	Morphy Richards Equip 1L Stainless Steel Kettle MREK1SS	50	74	85	60	73	88	61	3:19	SS	H	0.7	1.0	2
	Sunbeam Alinea Select Temperature Select Kettle KE2800K	159	74	83	60	77	88	60	3:11	SS	R	1.5	1.7	1
	Breville The Soft Top Pure BKE700	130	74	86	60	75	81	62	3:15	SS	H	1.0	1.7	1
	Breville The TempSet Kettle LKE842	160	74	84	60	78	86	64	3:10	SS	H	1.2	1.7	1
	Anko Clear Variable Temperature Kettle LD-K1045	69	74	85	60	71	87	62	3:21	G	H	1.6	1.5	1
	Sunbeam Capri Glass Kettle KE6150	70	74	86	60	66	85	64	3:30	G	H	1.2	1.7	1
	Sunbeam New York Jug Kettle KE4430KB	179	74	85	60	72	83	65	3:20	SS (B)	H	0.9	1.7	1
	Sunbeam Simply Shine 1.7L Jug Kettle KEP4007BK	90	74	84	60	78	84	63	3:10	P	H	0.8	1.7	1
	Anko 1.5 Litre Clear Kettle LED LD-K1046A	45	73	85	60	61	84	61	3:38	P	H	1.3	1.5	1
	Brabantia Cordless Kettle BBEK1001A	119	73	81	60	79	83	60	3:09	SS	H	1.1	1.7	2
	Russell Hobbs Colours Plus Black Kettle RHK2041BLK	60	73	79	60	81	88	65	3:05	SS	H	0.9	1.7	2
	Sunbeam Black Classics Glass Kettle KE6450K	100	73	87	60	61	83	62	3:38	G	H	1.3	1.7	1
	Breville The Compact Kettle Pure BKE395	110	73	82	60	80	84	64	3:07	G	H	0.9	1.0	ns
	Breville The Crystal clear BKE750CLR	130	73	85	60	70	82	64	3:23	G	H	1.1	1.7	1
	Breville The Soft Top Luxe BKE735BSS	209	73	85	60	69	81	65	3:25	SS	H	1.3	1.7	2
	Breville The Soft Top White BKE625	75	73	85	60	68	81	62	3:27	P	H	0.9	1.7	1
	Anko 1.7L Stainless Steel Kettle LD-K3030C	24	73	84	60	66	87	65	3:30	SS	H	0.9	1.7	1
	Sunbeam Arise 1.7L Kettle KEM5007SS	100	73	83	60	77	84	63	3:12	SS	H	1.1	1.7	1
	Sunbeam Brightside Kettle KEP1007	50	73	86	60	69	81	61	3:25	P	H	1.0	1.7	1
	Sunbeam Kyoto City Collection Kettle KEM8007	179	73	83	60	76	82	60	3:13	SS	H	1.1	1.7	1
	Sunbeam Maestro Dual Wall Glass Kettle KE9750	119	73	83	60	71	82	64	3:22	GP	H	1.5	1.7	1
	DeLonghi Eclettica Electric Kettle 1.7L KBY2001.BK	149	72	82	60	67	85	63	3:28	SS	R	1.2	1.7	1
	Pronti 1.7L Kettle KTL017-GST	76	72	83	60	65	85	61	3:32	SS	R	1.2	1.7	1
	Big W Contempo Stainless Steel Kettle 1.7L OP-KT1210A	24	72	82	60	64	86	63	3:34	SS	H	0.7	1.7	2
	Breville The MultiTemp Kettle LKE755	120	72	83	60	64	84	63	3:34	SS	H	1.2	1.7	1
	Kambrook Purely Perfect 1.7L Kettle BPA Free KKE630	70	72	83	60	67	84	61	3:28	SS	H	0.8	1.7	2

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend kettles with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 75% that also score at least 80% for ease of use. Member feedback and reliability may also be a factor in deciding which products are recommended. **Price** Recommended retail price as of November 2024. **CHOICE Expert Rating** Made up of ease of use (40%), noise (40%), boil time performance (10%) and energy efficiency (10%). **Material SS** Stainless steel, **G** Glass, **P** Plastic, **GP** Glass inner, clear plastic outer. **Lid type H** Hinged, **R** Removable. **(A)** Not recommended as many members have complained about its long term reliability after 1–2 years of use. **(B)** Coated. **ns** Not stated. All models are made in China. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

MILANTOAST

Serious dough

We've tested several toasters that cost hundreds of dollars, but are they worth it? **Alice Richard** slices the data

They say breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but how much would you pay to have your bread perfectly toasted every morning? $50? $100? What about $400?

No, really. Our experts have put several toasters that cost upwards of $400 in the hot seat to see if their performance is on par with their price tag.

The verdict? In some cases the answer is a firm "no"; in others it's a solid "maybe", depending on your priorities.

A high price for your slice

We've tested a few expensive toasters in our labs. There's the retro-styled Dualit NewGen that retails for $400 for a two-slice model and $525 for the four-slice version, while the more unassuming two-slice Milantoast costs $490.

Then there's the unusual-looking 2-slice Bugatti Volo that costs $439 for a white model, and $799 for a gold-coloured exterior.

They're expensive for quite different reasons. The Dualit and Milantoast models are designed to be completely repairable, so they'll supposedly last a lifetime.

They aren't quite the Ferraris of the toaster world – although with prices that high you could be forgiven for thinking so. Rather, they're more like the Teslas of toast: environmentally friendly, but a big upfront investment.

> **The Dualit and Milantoast are designed to be completely repairable so they'll supposedly last a lifetime**

Keeping with the car theme, the Bugatti toaster sounds like it's made by the excruciatingly expensive car brand, but it's actually an entirely different company that makes kitchen appliances and other kitchen products.

With the Bugatti, you're paying more for... well, we're not sure really. The aesthetic? (Questionable.) The brand? (It's not that Bugatti.) Or the cred of owning an $800 toaster? (Some people must be impressed by that kind of thing.)

You might notice the Milantoast and Bugatti models are missing from our table on page 51. That's because despite their premium price tags, they didn't score high enough to be included (we've only published the better scoring models for space).

With a CHOICE Expert Rating of just 54% and 56% respectively, the Milantoast and Bugatti Volo 2-slice toasters were among the lowest scoring toasters in our review, outclassed by even a $7.50 Anko toaster on virtually every test we conducted.

Repairable toasters

The Dualit NewGen and Milantoast models we tested are expensive, but they are designed so that every component can be replaced or repaired.

So instead of having to chuck your toaster when the element dies or the lever stops working, you can just have the part replaced or repaired, and then continue on your merry toasty way.

Both brands claim the toasters will last a lifetime, so you'll be preventing the tens of toasters you'd otherwise buy over the years from ending up in landfill. It's the equivalent of buying good-quality clothes and repairing them rather than buying fast fashion and throwing things out when they inevitably wear out sooner than they should.

So are these toasters worth 500 bucks? The Milantoast model – no, due to its poor performance. The two Dualit NewGen toasters both scored 70% overall in our review. Not high enough to be recommended (we typically recommend toasters with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 75% or ▶

Volo
BUGATTI

IMAGES: MILANTOAST / DUALIT / BUGATTI

No set and forget

The Dualit NewGen toasters use analog controls, meaning they use an old-fashioned timer dial. When toasting is complete, you'll need to manually raise the toast out of the carriage using a lever (although this does help keep it warm).

The toasters' simplicity is a big drawcard in that it makes them easy to repair, but it can also be a drawback. The manual design means that you'll have to be more involved in the toasting process, and our testers also noted some parts were "significantly difficult to clean".

"Getting good results with a manual toaster like this requires a lot of trial and error – and probably plenty of under or overcooked toast," says CHOICE appliance expert Kim Gilmour. "You can get better results but you'll need to persevere. It's a learning curve."

more and that pass our safety checks), but still a good result.

When you add up how much you could spend on toasters in your lifetime, $400–500 actually doesn't sound like much. You'll have to factor in the cost of replacement parts and labour, but you could still end up ahead if you invest in a repairable toaster.

When you add up how much you could spend on toasters in your lifetime, $400–500 actually doesn't sound like much

Let's say you're buying toasters for around 50 years of your life. If you buy a mid-range toaster at $100, it should last you around four years, so that's $1250. A cheap $30 toaster will likely need to be replaced every two years, so over your toaster-buying lifetime, it'll add up to $750*.

When you look at those figures, a $500 toaster starts to look like a reasonable price to pay – especially when you consider how many toasters won't be going into landfill.

(*These numbers will vary based on market circumstances. For instance, inflation might push those numbers higher, or they could go lower if toasters become cheaper to manufacture.)

Russell Hobbs

Are cheap toasters any good?

Three of the six toasters we've recommended in our table at right cost less than $100, so clearly you don't need to spend a fortune to get great results. However, there's no guarantee that cheaper appliances will last a long time, which means you may have to replace them after a couple of years. That's a lot of toasters going into landfill!

According to our research, a regular toaster will last anywhere from two to six years, depending on how much you spend – higher-end toasters do tend to last longer, while cheaper ones often have a shorter lifespan.

(This is just a rough guide: even expensive toasters can fail before their time, and cheaper ones can kick on for years.)

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Anko	C
Breville	D
DeLonghi	D
Kambrook	D
KitchenAid	D
Russell Hobbs	D
Smeg	B
Sunbeam	F

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

			PERFORMANCE									SPECIFICATIONS					
Recommended		Price ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Frozen bread score (%)	Multigrain score (%)	Toasting evenness score (%)	Single-slice score (%)	Toasting consistency cycle after cycle score (%)	Measured toasting time (min:sec)	Number of slots	Separate carriage control	High-lift carriage	Dimensions (cm, L x W x H)	Bread carriage dimensions (mm, L x W x H)	Warranty (years)
4-SLICE TOASTERS																	
✓	**Russell Hobbs** Addison RHT514BLK	100	78	79	74	75	70	80	75	90	4:11	4	✓	✓	27 x 29 x 19	140 x 25 x 115	2
✓	**Breville** The ToastSet LTA842DKB	170	77	75	80	80	70	60	75	90	4:09	4	✓	✓	29 x 30 x 20	160 x 36 x 140	1
	Sunbeam Kyoto City Collection TAM8004BK (A)	199	76	74	80	75	70	70	55	90	2:44	4	✓	✓	28 x 33 x 20	141 x 35 x 125	1
	Breville The Lift & Look Pro BTA730 (B)	180	75	70	86	40	50	80	75	90	3:00	2	na	✓	40 x 19 x 20	255 x 30 x 125	1
✓	**Russell Hobbs** Legacy RHT455WHI	80	75	80	64	85	80	80	55	90	4:30	4	✓	✓	29 x 30 x 19	140 x 30 x 115	2
	Smeg TSF02BLAU	299	74	72	80	60	50	70	85	90	4:25	2	na		41 x 21 x 22	260 x 35 x 110	1
	Sunbeam New York Collection Black Bronze TA4440KB	179	74	72	80	85	40	80	55	90	2:55	4	✓	✓	27 x 33 x 20	141 x 35 x 132	1
	KitchenAid 5KMT4109APT	279	73	74	72	75	70	70	45	95	3:23	4	✓	✓	31 x 30 x 21	145 x 40 x 140	2
	Breville The Smart Toast BTA830	219	71	65	84	48	40	60	100	80	3:35	2	na		40 x 18 x 20	250 x 40 x 140	2
	Russell Hobbs Colours Plus RHT2836BLK	80	71	73	65	58	60	70	85	90	2:40	4	✓	✓	29 x 30 x 18	135 x 35 x 130	2
	Laura Ashley Elveden VQ_SBT583	180	71	69	74	70	50	60	75	90	3:40	4	✓	✓	26 x 29 x 19	140 x 35 x 140	2
	Breville The 'A Bit More' Plus BTA440BSS	110	71	71	71	58	60	70	90	75	2:55	2	na	✓	39 x 15 x 19	260 x 30 x 110	1
	Breville The Lift & Look Plus BTA380WHT	110	71	71	71	65	50	80	90	70	2:45	2	na	✓	40 x 17 x 20	260 x 30 x 110	1
	Sunbeam Alinea Collection TA2740K	139	71	69	74	63	70	60	55	90	2:57	4	✓	✓	30 x 30 x 20	140 x 38 x 125	1
	Dualit NewGen D4VMHA	525	70	76	57	60	70	80	90	75	2:30	4	✓	✓	20 x 34 x 22	150 x 30 x 165	5
	DeLonghi Eclettica CTY4003	169	69	64	80	65	60	60	65	70	3:01	4	✓	✓	34 x 31 x 21	140 x 35 x 135	1
2-SLICE TOASTERS																	
✓	**Kambrook** Textured KTA220	59	78	77	80	73	70	70	65	100	3:30	2	na	✓	28 x 18 x 19	150 x 40 x 135	1
✓	**Kambrook** The Smarter Choice KTA120WHT	39	76	73	82	75	50	70	65	95	3:00	2	na	✓	28 x 17 x 19	135 x 30 x 120	1
✓	**KitchenAid** 5AKMT223OB	259	75	75	75	75	60	80	75	80	4:15	2	na		28 x 19 x 21	145 x 42 x 150	2
	Anko TA1420-SA	25	74	74	74	75	60	80	55	90	3:56	2	na	✓	26 x 17 x 19	140 x 40 x 135	1
	Breville The 'A Bit More' Plus BTA435BSS	80	73	72	74	73	60	80	35	95	3:11	2	na	✓	31 x 15 x 20	145 x 40 x 135	1
	Smeg TSF01PBAU	269	73	67	86	65	80	60	45	75	3:00	2	na		32 x 19 x 20	145 x 30 x 125	1
	Breville The Lift & Look Plus BTA360WHT	75	72	69	80	83	40	80	35	95	3:10	2	na	✓	28 x 17 x 20	148 x 39 x 138	1
	Russell Hobbs Classic RHT12BRU	60	71	74	63	75	70	80	75	70	2:10	2	na	✓	27 x 17 x 20	170 x 35 x 140	2
	Dualit NewGen D2VMHA AU	400	70	72	66	60	50	80	90	75	2:03	2	na	✓	25 x 26 x 22	155 x 31 x 135	5
	Kambrook Perfect Slice KTA270	69	70	69	71	70	60	70	75	70	2:12	2	na	✓	28 x 17 x 20	135 x 30 x 110	2
	Kambrook Scandi Chic KTA290	90	69	64	80	63	70	70	25	75	3:00	2	na	✓	30 x 19 x 19	140 x 35 x 130	2
	Laura Ashley Elveden SBT582	119	69	67	74	68	70	50	45	95	3:07	2	na	✓	28 x 17 x 19	140 x 35 x 140	2
	Breville The Toast Select Luxe BTA735SHY	209	69	67	74	58	70	50	65	90	4:07	2	na	✓	34 x 17 x 19	140 x 35 x 125	1
	Anko Stainless Steel Toaster LD-T7007	24	69	66	77	70	50	70	55	80	2:35	2	na	✓	25 x 17 x 19	131 x 35 x 120	1
	DeLonghi Eclettica CTY2003	149	67	61	80	65	50	50	65	75	3:00	2	na	✓	34 x 19 x 21	140 x 35 x 135	1
	Anko Retro Toaster LD-T7005	29	67	68	65	58	70	60	55	90	3:00	2	na	✓	29 x 19 x 19	140 x 40 x 135	1
	Anko Toaster TA01106-SA	7.50	66	63	74	73	40	50	60	90	2:30	2	na		26 x 15 x 18	130 x 25 x 110	1

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend toasters with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 75% and a safe exterior temperature. **Price** Recommended retail as of November 2024. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of 70% performance and 30% ease of use. **Performance** Toasting evenness and consistency of results, cycle after cycle (50%), multigrain bread (20%), single slice bread (15%) and frozen bread (15%). **Ease of use** How easy is it to operate the controls (40%), remove crumbs (30%) and clean the exterior (30%). **Toasting time** We use white bread for this measurement. **(A)** Exterior temperature too hot for this toaster to be recommended. **(B)** Many members have complained about this toaster's long-term reliability, so we've withdrawn our recommendation. **na** Not applicable. ■

IMAGES: KITCHENAID / RUSSELL HOBBS

Really big air fryers

Ovens with air fryer mode... gimmick, or great idea? **Alice Richard** finds out

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and, in the world of kitchen appliances, everyone's trying to cash in on the air fryer phenomenon.

First there was the simple air fryer. Then came the twin-basket air fryer. Then the benchtop oven air fryer. Even multi-cooker manufacturers are now releasing models with air-frying capabilities. (One boasts 14 functions!)

So it's no surprise that oven manufacturers such as Westinghouse, Electrolux and Fisher & Paykel are jumping on the trend. And it makes sense, given that air fryers are effectively mini ovens. Why not take an air fryer and supersize it?

If you're an air fryer lover who's looking to take things to the next level, you might be eyeing off an oven that can do it all, including air frying. But is it a good option, or should you stick to a regular oven plus an air fryer on the bench?

If you have fan-grill mode, adding an air fryer basket can effectively turn your oven into a giant air fryer

Air fryer mode explained

You probably wouldn't be able to tell an oven with an air fryer mode apart from a regular oven. There's no secret air-frying compartment, and no separate door – nothing that gives away its secret superpower.

You'll find the main difference inside, with the addition of a special air fryer shelf – a shallow mesh basket that sits in a rack. (You'll need to place a tray underneath it to catch the drips.)

The oven will also have a specific air-fry mode, which is essentially an oven setting that switches on the top heating element and the fan, circulating hot air through the oven, but that's not a new concept.

"You could create a similar effect by using the fan-grill setting on a regular oven," says CHOICE kitchen expert Chantelle Dart.

"Not all ovens have fan-grill mode, but almost every model in our current wall ovens review and freestanding ovens review does."

So, if you have fan-grill mode, adding an air fryer basket made for ovens can effectively turn it into a giant air fryer (depending on what you're cooking). You could pick up a tray for around $9 from Kmart, $30 from Amazon, or splash out and spend over $100 on a fancy Miele one.

Is it worth it?

Our experts always assess an oven's cooking performance, but we also look at another important aspect: ease of use. An oven may cook perfectly, but if it's a pain to clean and use, it's definitely not a good buy. So how do air-frying ovens compare with standalone air fryers in terms of performance and cleaning?

PERFORMANCE

Since ovens with air fryers are a relatively new phenomenon, we haven't tested many of them. But in our most recent test, seven of the eight models we tested came with an air fryer function. The brands were Miele, Omega, Westinghouse, Neff, Smeg, Haier and Samsung. Their air-frying capabilities varied, with some scoring perfect marks for particular foods and some bombing out.

"The **Haier HWO60S14EPX4** and **Omega OBO6011AM** were only OK when we tested them in air fryer mode, but the **Miele H2861BP**, **Neff B59CR72Y0A** and **Westinghouse WVEP6716DD** had very good air-frying capabilities," says Dart.

Getting used to an air-frying oven may take a bit of trial and error. Our experts have found that using different shelf positions and higher temperatures can give better results.

IMAGES: WESTINGHOUSE / ELECTROLUX / BOSCH

CLEANING

Regardless of how well an oven cooks in air fryer mode, if cleaning up afterwards is a pain, you'll probably avoid using the air-fry function altogether. And unfortunately, cleaning is where these air fryer ovens fall down.

Firstly, the air fryer basket can be difficult to clean and may stain and discolour over time. Then there's the rack that the basket sits in, and the drip tray that catches crumbs and oil.

"Some manufacturers will supply the air fryer basket or tray, which is usually made from stainless steel," says another CHOICE kitchen expert, home economist Fiona Mair.

"These types can be difficult to clean and may stain. However, two ovens came with an enamelled perforated tray, and we found cleaning them much easier."

And depending on what you're cooking, you might need to clean the whole oven afterwards to get the food splatters off. Unless your oven has a pyrolytic cleaning function, it's a big job – a much bigger job than just popping the basket from your benchtop air fryer in the dishwasher.

If you skip cleaning your oven after air frying, the build-up of oil and fat can cause the oven to release smoke and unpleasant smells when you use it next.

"If you're considering an oven with an air fryer function, we suggest you look for one that also has a pyrolytic cleaning function. It'll make the clean-up process much easier and save you time," says Mair. ▸

How much do ovens with air fryer mode cost?

Ovens with air fryer mode tend to also have plenty of other bells and whistles, so they're often at the more expensive end of the scale. Of the models we've tested, prices range from $799 to $3699 for a 60cm wall oven and from $5499 to $7399 for a 90cm freestanding oven with an induction cooktop.

"Ovens with an air-fry function can cost you around $200 more than comparable models. You can pick up a good air fryer for that amount, or even less," says Dart.

An oven gives you a bit more room to move in terms of air-frying larger items

Should you just buy an air fryer?

Are you better off opting for a more affordable oven plus a good-quality air fryer? Yes and no.

"Some ovens with air-fry function need to be preheated before you use them, whereas air fryers generally don't need to be preheated, so an air fryer can save time," says Dart.

"But an air fryer has a much smaller capacity than an oven, so if you're cooking larger amounts of food you'd need to cook in batches. In an oven you could cook the same amount of food in one go."

Then there's the cost factor. Ovens can use more energy than air fryers, especially since they need to be preheated – so instead of running your oven for an hour to make a batch of nuggets, you might only have your air fryer on for 20 minutes. If you weigh up the energy costs of running a large appliance just for a single tray of air-fried food, you might find that an air fryer comes out ahead.

What works for one household may not work for another, so you'll need to weigh up the pros and cons for your particular situation.

Cooking in an air fryer oven

You can cook all your air fryer faves using air fryer mode in an oven: think frozen chips, chicken nuggets, pork belly, marinated chicken wings and more. However, you can only air fry on one shelf of the oven, so bear that in mind if you're planning an air-fried feast.

On the flip side, an oven gives you a bit more room to move in terms of air frying larger items such as a whole chicken or roast, which may not fit in a smaller benchtop air fryer.

"For some ovens with air fryer mode, the instructions state that you don't need to shake or turn your food as the basket helps to promote air flow," says Dart.

"However, we don't always find this to be the case and you may get a better result by turning the food to encourage even cooking."

This is no different to using a benchtop air fryer, so air frying in your oven isn't really any extra work. (Unless you have a benchtop air fryer with a rotating basket, which takes care of the turning for you.)

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
AEG	C
Asko	F
Beko	C
Bosch	C
Electrolux	C
Fisher & Paykel	F
Haier	F
Ikea	C
Miele	B
Neff	C
Samsung	F
Smeg	B
Westinghouse	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS											
Recommended		Price ($)	10-year running cost ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Brand reliability score (%)	Brand satisfaction score (%)	Self-cleaning type	Telescopic runners	Top and bottom element	Bottom element only	Fan-assist	Half-grill	Air fryer function	Assisted cooking	Steam cooking function	Number of shelf positions	Measured internal baking volume (L)	Origin
✓	**AEG** BPK742320M	2999	474	86	94	75	84	85	P	✓	✓	✓				✓		5	69	Germany
	Asko OP8687B	3199	533	84	94	69	na	na	P, S	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		5	69	Slovenia
	Miele H2861BP	3399	559	84	92	71	90	90	P	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		5	73	Germany
	Neff B59CR72Y0A	3499	463	84	91	74	91	92	P	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			4	66	Germany
	Bosch HBA574EB0A	1899	413	83	92	69	89	87	P	✓	✓	✓				✓		5	64	Poland
	Westinghouse WVEP6716DD	1599	489	83	91	71	82	81	P	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		5	64	Australia
	Beko BBO6851MDX	1049	521	82	93	66	na	na	C, S	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	5	68	Turkey
	Beko BBO6852PDX	1899	528	82	90	69	na	na	P	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			5	67	Turkey
	Electrolux EVEP619DSE	3699	474	82	89	71	74	82	P	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	5	71	Australia
	Fisher & Paykel OB90S9MEPX3	4699	781	82	87	75	82	83	P	✓	✓		✓					4	80	Italy
	Ikea KULINARISK 504.210.60	1399	463	82	88	73	na	na	P	✓	✓	✓				✓		5	62	Italy
	Miele H7260BP	4199	542	82	86	75	90	90	P	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓ (A)	5	67	Germany
	Miele H7464BP	6799	520	82	86	75	90	90	P	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	5	73	Germany
	Bosch HBA534ES0A	1299	475	81	92	64	89	87	C	✓	✓	✓						5	66	Poland
	Samsung NV7B5755SAS	1999	489	81	91	65	na	na	P, S	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	5	69	Malaysia
	Miele H7860BP	9499	521	80	84	75	90	90	P	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	5	73	Germany
	Haier HWO60S14EPX4	1299	410	79	87	66	na	na	P	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			5	60	Turkey
	Bosch HBA172BB0A/72	1599	447	77	83	69	89	87	P	✓	✓	✓				✓		5	67	Spain
	Fisher & Paykel OB60SD11PLX1	1999	478	77	81	71	82	83	P	✓	✓		✓		✓			6	66	Thailand
	Fisher & Paykel OB60SD16PLX1	2799	497	76	81	69	82	83	P	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			6	68	Thailand
	Ikea BRÄNDBO 905.576.50	899	486	76	87	60	na	na	na		✓	✓				✓		5	68	Italy
	Ikea FXJM6 MATTRADITION	699	437	76	86	61	na	na	na		✓		✓					5	60	Poland
	Smeg SFA63M3TVX	1790	519	74	84	58	84	77	S		✓	✓	✓					5	62	Italy
	Smeg SOPA6301TN	2290	546	74	84	59	84	77	P	✓	✓		✓					5	62	Italy
	Omega OBO6011AM	799	446	73	83	58	na	na	na	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			5	63	Italy
	Bosch HBF133BS0A	999	493	71	78	60	89	87	na		✓							5	62	Turkey
	Electrolux EVE614DSE	1299	521	71	75	65	74	82	na	✓	✓	✓					✓	5	58	Australia
	Haier HWO60S7MB4	659	370	71	79	58	na	na	na		✓							5	57	ns
	Inalto IO60XL5M	499	446	70	76	61	na	na	na									5	76	China
	Smeg SOPA6102TB3	2790	531	70	76	60	84	77	P	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			5	67	Italy
	Ilve OV60SLKMP/SS	2999	507	68	74	59	na	na	na		✓	✓	✓					5	55	Italy

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend ovens with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 85%. **Price** Recommended retail as of November 2024. **Running costs** Based on running the oven at 170°C for one hour, three times a week at 40c/kWh over 10 years. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of cooking performance (60%) and ease of use (40%). **Brand reliability** and **satisfaction** scores are from our 2021 product reliability survey and apply to brands, not individual models. **Self-cleaning type P** Pyrolytic, **C** Catalytic, **S** Steam. **Telescopic runners** Some may be optional extras. **Assisted cooking** lets you cook certain dishes without having to enter the temperature or time required thanks to pre-programmed settings. **(A)** Called Moisture Plus. **na** Not applicable or not available. **ns** Not specified. All models are 60cm wide ovens except for the Fisher & Paykel OB90S9MEPX3, which is a 90cm wide oven. All models except the Haier HWO60S7MB4 and the Ilve OV60SLKMP/SS have a fan grill setting. ■

IMAGES: GETTY

Up top or in front?

When it comes to washers, there are two main types to choose from: top loaders or front loaders. **Matt Steen** and **Alice Richard** compare the pair

If you're in the market for a new washer, the first step in narrowing down your choice is to decide whether you'd prefer a front-loading washing machine or a top-loading washing machine. You might already have a preference based on your previous washer, laundry space, or even your mobility, but it's always worth examining why one or the other might suit you best. Some of the differences between the two might surprise you.

Front loaders can use up to 70% less water than top loaders of a similar size

Efficiency

BEST: FRONT LOADERS

Front loaders can use up to 70% less water than top loaders of similar size. The reason top loaders are so thirsty is because they need enough water to make your clothes float to clean them – unlike front loaders, which use gravity to tumble your clothes.

And even though top loaders usually take less time to wash your clothes, they use more energy to do it since they have to heat all that water.

Finally, top loaders also use more detergent than front loaders – a cost that can really add up over the years.

Upfront cost

BEST: TOP LOADERS

As a general rule, front-loading washing machines tend to be a little bit more expensive than top loaders. This is because there's more materials in them: ballast, rubber seals, and importantly, a heater.

But while you might pay more at the cash register, a front loader will help you save on electricity and water bills, so could end up costing about the same or even less over the machine's lifetime.

Gentleness

BEST: FRONT LOADERS

Top loaders clean your clothes by rubbing them against each other, whereas a front loader cleans by tumbling: it uses gravity to pick up and drop the clothes into the soapy water over and over.

The front loader method results in less damage to your clothes over time – so even though you're likely to pay more upfront for the appliance, you won't be having to replace your clothes as frequently.

Cleaning performance

BEST: FRONT LOADERS

Despite top loaders using far more water per wash, they actually don't clean clothes quite as well as water-thrifty front-loading machines. According to our test results, front loaders generally do a better job at getting your clothes clean.

Front loaders also have more programs and higher temperature options, allowing you more options to choose from to get the right clean for your load.

Cycle times

BEST: TOP LOADERS

Because front loaders use less water, they have to work harder to get your clothes clean – and they do this by running for longer. One machine we've tested took more than four hours to complete a cycle!

On average, a front loader will take about 144 minutes to wash a full load, compared with an average of 59 minutes for a top loader, so you'll need to factor the longer cycle time into your schedule if you switch to a front loader.

We explain this in more detail in our previous washing machine review in *CHOICE* Feb 2024.

Spin cycle performance

BEST: FRONT LOADERS

Front loaders tend to have much faster spin cycles than top loaders – up to 1600rpm in some models.

A faster spin cycle means more water removed from the clothes. And the less moisture in your clothes when they come out of the machine, the faster they'll dry – saving you time and potentially money (if you use a clothes dryer, it won't have to work as hard).

The only downside to the faster spin cycle is that it can increase creases and flatten the pile on your towels, which can make them less soft. But you can dial down the spin speed if that's a problem.

Convenience

BEST: TOP LOADERS

As previously mentioned, top loaders have faster cycle times than top loaders, but that's not the only way they can be more convenient. Top loaders can also be opened at any point during their cycle so you can add extra clothes (or retrieve something that has been accidentally placed inside) at any point, whereas front loaders lock during the wash cycle to prevent the door from being opened. Some models do have an "add item" feature that allows you to open the door after the wash cycle has begun, but this is only possible at certain points in the cycle.

Top loaders are also generally lighter than front loaders, so they're easier to move (front loaders need a heavy weight to help keep them balanced). And you may find adding clothes to top loaders without having to bend down is more comfortable, although you can always mount your front loader on the wall if you'd like it to sit higher.

Finally, top loaders are the quieter of the two options, which may be important to you if your washing machine is near your living area or bedroom. Front loaders average around 61dBA, compared to an average of 58dBA for top loaders. ▶

Top loaders have faster cycle times and can be opened at any point during their cycle

IMAGE: GETTY | LG

5 signs it's time for a new washing machine

Wondering whether it's time to upgrade your washer? Here are some signs it's time to hit the shops.

1 IT'S MORE THAN SIX YEARS OLD

Once your machine is more than six years old, a major failure usually means you'll need to buy a new one because any repairs will be expensive. And with older appliances you'll need to weigh up the risk that, after paying to fix one problem, something else may break.

You might find that repairs are cheaper than you'd expect

If you have a front loader, once it hits 12 years of age, it'll likely be cheaper to replace it than repair it, even for more minor failures. For a top loader, that figure drops to seven years.

But – and this is a big but! – it's always worth trying to repair an older washing machine, particularly if it's still within the life expectancy range. You might find that repairs are cheaper than you'd expect – and some of them you might even be able to DIY.

2 IT'S ON THE MOVE

If your washing machine likes to 'walk' around the room during a cycle, it could be time for a repair or replacement. There are two main reasons why your machine is never where you left it before a cycle: it's either off balance or the shock absorbers have failed.

If the machine is off balance, it's a pretty easy fix: first, use a spirit level to check if your machine is level and adjust the feet accordingly if it's not. Then make sure you're loading your machine evenly by alternating between large and small items, and not overloading or wrapping laundry around the agitator.

If the shock absorbers are broken it can be an expensive fix. You'll need to weigh up the cost of having it repaired, the age of the machine and how much a new machine will cost.

3 IT'S GETTING NOISIER

If your machine has developed new noises or has become much louder than it used to be, it's probably time to have it serviced, repaired or replaced.

4 IT'S LEAKING

There are all kinds of causes for washing machine leaks – some benign, like a tap connector that's not tightened properly, and others more serious, like a coin or key getting in between the washer's two drums, punching a hole in the outer drum.

If you're finding small puddles of water on the floor, check all the connections first before you panic. But if the puddles are more like lakes, you might need to call for a repair person or even start looking for a new machine.

5 IT'S STAINING YOUR CLOTHES

You might not realise that the washing machine drum is rusty until you start seeing rust stains on your clothes. There are many things that can cause rust spots in your washing machine, including damage to the drum, but even leaving damp laundry in the machine can cause rusting.

If it's just surface rust, you should be able to get rid of it by simply running another couple of wash cycles to flush it out. But if you continue to see rust stains on your clothes, the issue probably runs deeper and you're likely going to need a new machine.

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Asko	F
Beko	C
Bosch	C
Electrolux	C
Fisher & Paykel	F
Haier	F
LG	C
Miele	B
Westinghouse	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE										SPECIFICATIONS					
Recommended		Price ($)	10-year running costs ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Dirt removal score (%)	Rinse performance score (%)	Gentleness score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Spin efficiency score (%)	Brand reliability (%)	Water used – normal cycle (L)	Cycle time – normal cycle (min)	Long cycle time penalty (% points)	Out-of-balance correction	Woolens cycle (machine / hand washable)	Extra rinse	Tap connection	Capacity (kg)	Claimed dimensions (cm, H x W x D)
FRONT LOADERS																			
✓	**LG** WV9-1610W (A)	1299	560	78	78	84	65	85	70	88	47	88	0	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	H & C	10	85 x 60 x 62
✓	**Miele** WCA 020	1549	601	76	83	91	72	88	79	86	41	158	7	✓	✓ / ✓		Cold	7	85 x 60 x 64
✓	**Miele** WWH860 WCS	2999	727	76	85	96	65	86	78	86	45	183	8	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	H & C	8	85 x 60 x 65
✓	**Westinghouse** WWF9024M5WA	1199	712	76	81	95	64	75	71	na	65	110	3	✓	✓ / –		Cold	9	85 x 60 x 66
	Beko BFL7510W	949	702	75	84	89	56	81	67	79	54	132	4	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	7.5	84 x 60 x 64
✓	**Bosch** WGA254U0AU	1699	736	75	86	97	61	80	77	90	56	159	7	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	10	85 x 60 x 65
✓	**Electrolux** EWF8024Q5WB	999	730	75	82	96	60	75	71	82	65	120	4	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 66
	Fisher & Paykel WH1160F2	1899	790	75	79	97	55	74	73	82	66	111	3	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	H & C	11	85 x 60 x 68
	Haier HWF95AN1	899	528	75	73	86	66	82	60	na	52	58	0	ns	– / –		Cold	9.5	85 x 60 x 66
✓	**LG** WV9-1412W	1499	1263	75	87	96	63	82	68	88	52	278	8	ns	✓ / ✓	✓	H & C	12	85 x 60 x 66
✓	**Miele** WWD120	2049	692	75	84	96	63	85	76	86	48	160	8	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 65
	Miele WWD164 WCS	2299	749	75	84	97	58	85	84	86	46	185	8	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	9	85 x 60 x 65
	Miele WWG660	2799	761	75	85	96	57	84	78	86	49	158	7	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	9	85 x 60 x 65
	Asko W2084CW	1999	476	74	72	77	59	89	74	79	40	73	0	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59
	Asko W4086P.W.AU	2399	508	74	73	75	63	87	77	79	43	75	0	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59
	Bosch WGG244ARAU	1799	747	74	86	93	58	85	76	90	46	221	8	✓	✓ / ✓	✓	Cold	9	85 x 60 x 64
	Electrolux EWF1041R9WB	1749	793	74	82	96	56	75	76	82	65	137	5	✓	✓ / ✓		Cold	10	85 x 60 x 66
✓	**Electrolux** EWF7524D3WB	849	684	74	76	95	63	77	79	82	61	127	4	✓	– / –	✓	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 58
	Fisher & Paykel WH1160HG1	2999	930	74	79	97	55	71	75	82	72	111	3	✓	✓ / –	✓	H & C	11	85 x 60 x 67
✓	**Fisher & Paykel** WH8060J3	999	694	74	78	93	62	78	69	82	59	124	4	✓	– / –	✓	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59
TOP LOADERS																			
✓	**LG** WTL9-12B	1499	754	73	80	81	37	77	80	88	62	90	0	✓	– / –	✓	H & C	12	107 x 69 x 73
✓	**LG** WTG1434VHF	1499	836	71	80	85	35	73	79	88	69	91	2	✓	– / –	✓	H & C	14	103 x 69 x 73
	Fisher & Paykel WL1068P1	1499	887	70	71	91	46	58	73	82	95	55	0	✓	– / –		H & C	10	106 x 69 x 70
	Fisher & Paykel WL8058G1	999	889	68	71	92	48	54	59	82	103	61	0	✓	✓ / –	✓	H & C	8	104 x 58 x 60
	Fisher & Paykel WL9058G1	999	850	68	71	90	46	56	60	82	99	60	0	✓	✓ / –	✓	H & C	9	102 x 58 x 60
	LG WTG7520	799	873	67	70	93	41	56	56	88	98	58	0	✓	✓ / –	✓	H & C	7.5	96 x 59 x 61
	Fisher & Paykel WA8560G1	1099	1026	66	65	96	49	45	69	82	119	43	0	✓	✓ / –		H & C	8.5	108 x 60 x 60
	Haier HWT09AN1	1099	888	66	65	90	52	53	59	na	104	57	0	ns	✓ / –	✓	H & C	9	102 x 58 x 59
	LG WTL3-09G	799	1027	66	73	91	47	42	54	88	125	54	0	✓	– / –	✓	H & C	9	102 x 64 x 67
	Fisher & Paykel MW513	899	1168	65	65	96	54	35	68	82	137	41	0	✓	✓ / –		H & C	5.5	103 x 56 x 56

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend front loaders with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 70% and 75% for dirt removal, with no other score below 60%. We recommend top loaders with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 70% and 75% for dirt removal. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2024. **Running costs** Approximate cost over 10 years for one daily load on a 'normal' cycle, based on 40c/kWh for electricity and $2 per 1000L for water. Excludes detergent. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of dirt removal (40%), rinse performance (20%), gentleness (15%), water efficiency (15%) and spin efficiency (10%). **Long cycle time penalty** Applies to the CHOICE Expert Rating only for washing machines with cycles taking 90 minutes or longer. The longer the cycle time, the greater the penalty. **Brand reliability**, where we have statistics, is taken from our 2021 Brand Reliability Survey, but doesn't contribute to the CHOICE Expert Rating and refers to the brand only, not that particular model. Differences of 3% or more between brands are significant. **Tap connection Cold** Machine connects to cold water only. **H&C** Machine has both hot and cold water connections (required for top loaders to perform a warm wash). **Dimensions** are for the smallest box that fits around the machine, as stated by the manufacturer. **(A)** Units produced after 23/08/24 deliver a much faster wash cycle (they will have a serial number starting with 408PNxxxxxxx). The model we tested delivers the improved wash cycle time of under 90 minutes. **na** Not available. **ns** Not stated. ■

Cot cams

Need help keeping an eye on your little one at nap time? **Peter Zaluzny** helps you choose the best baby monitor

With the help of a baby monitor, you can hear and see your bub, or even transmit soothing sounds to them, from virtually anywhere. These devices are handy if you have a large home where your child's room may be out of earshot, but remember that Red Nose Australia recommends your baby sleeps in the same room as you for at least the first six months.

Most models offer both audio and video monitoring these days. While some have stuck with a dedicated monitoring unit (such as a tablet), others use smartphone apps, which can reduce the overall price.

We can help you decide which option is right for your home.

> **Audio-based baby monitors have been almost entirely replaced by audio/video systems**

How baby monitors work

Baby monitors fall into two broad categories: audio or video.

Audio-based baby monitors are essentially a walkie-talkie between you and your baby's room. These were common for decades, but have been almost entirely replaced by audio/video systems.

Video-based baby monitors send a video feed from a camera in your child's room to a tablet-like viewing device (also known as a carer's unit), or to your smartphone via an app.

A few apps let you use another smartphone or a tablet instead of having to buy a monitoring camera. The 'child' unit uses the device's built-in microphone and camera to check baby's sound and movements. Meanwhile, the carer's phone lets you keep an eye and ear on them from anywhere in the house.

If your baby makes a sound during restless sleep, or they start crying, then the microphone will pick up the audio and send it your way. Some video monitors will also alert you with audio if they detect movement, or conversely if they detect no movement for a significant period of time.

A few apps even offer remote access outside the home, so you can receive updates at work or when out and about, while somebody else is at home with the baby.

CONNECTION AND PERFORMANCE

A Wi-Fi unit is usually the best option if you have good internet coverage in your home, particularly from something like a mesh network. But some baby monitors also offer connection via radio frequencies, a proprietary signal, or mobile networks such as 4G or 5G.

The baby monitor should be able to maintain quality sound and picture, even when you're at the other end of the house. The monitor should also be able to pick up and reproduce soft sounds. Build quality is a big part of this, but you also need to consider interference from other devices.

Monitors that use common radio frequencies may pick up signals and interference from other nearby devices (including those of your neighbours) such as cordless phones, microwaves, or other baby monitors. However, some monitors let you choose from several frequencies to minimise this, while others that use DECT (digital enhanced cordless communication) are more private and offer less interference.

Dedicated monitor vs smartphone app

As far as performance, picture and sound quality go, we've come across good and bad apps and carer's units across the board. Additional functions and features are also fairly comparable. And both types connect to a dedicated camera in the child's room.

APP PROS AND CONS

Monitors that use an app are typically cheaper as you don't need to cover the cost of a proprietary carer's unit. The app may cost a little extra on top of the monitor, but this is rarely more than ten dollars.

You're also likely to have your phone nearby at all times and it can switch to mobile data if the Wi-Fi drops out.

Installing the app on two smartphones (or tablets) is a viable, and potentially cheap, option

But older phones may not support the latest versions of the carer's app, so double check compatibility before you buy.

Baby monitoring apps can also drain your phone's battery. The last thing you want is your phone to shut down when you're relying on it as a baby monitor.

CARER'S UNIT PROS AND CONS

Carer's units are designed to work with the included camera out of the box, so you won't need to worry about compatibility issues. They typically use physical controls (which you may prefer over a touch screen) and come with mounts or kickstands for easy access while in use.

But these units are usually larger than phones and most pockets, so you need to find a place to put them that's in earshot. It can be easy to forget the carer's unit if you duck upstairs or head outside for a while.

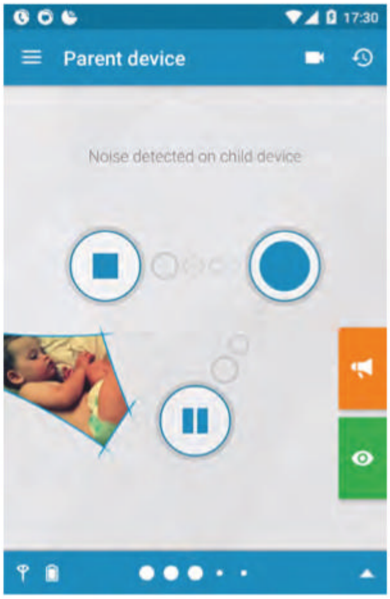
Using a smartphone as camera

Installing the app on two smartphones (or tablets) is a viable, and potentially cheap, option if you have an old phone kicking around the house. But there are a few considerations:

- The phone must have a good-quality camera and microphone.
- The phone must be plugged into a power point so it can monitor your baby 24/7.
- You have to find and install a stand or mount to position the phone towards the sleeping area.

Almost all phones position the charging port at the bottom, which can make mounting tricky. Wireless charging can get around this, but this feature isn't very common and typically reserved for more expensive models of smartphone.

Also, picture quality in dark lighting conditions can be very poor unless you turn on the phone's light, which could disturb baby's sleep. ▶



You can choose between a dedicated carer's unit (left), or an app on your smartphone (above).

IMAGE: GETTY

What to look for

There are plenty of features and functions to consider, whether you go for a camera with a dedicated carer's unit or smartphone app.

MOVEMENT MONITOR

This sounds an alarm when the baby is restless, or when there is no movement after a specific length of time. This time limit will be noted in the instructions.

INFRARED CAMERA

This is useful if the baby's room gets quite dark or if you're monitoring them at night, though the image will show up as black and white and can have poor contrast.

SOUND INDICATOR LIGHTS

The visual sound indicators will light up to alert you when bub cries. They allow you to 'see' the noise your baby makes rather than just hear it.

CAMERA MOUNT TYPE

There's a range of camera mounts available that let you place the camera in a variety of locations. It's very important to consider this, especially if you're in a rental property where you may not be able to screw the camera into a wall.

- **Flat surface:** For placing the camera on a surface such as a chest of drawers, changing table or windowsill. This is the most common mount type.
- **Clamp:** Lets you attach the camera to something like the side of a bookshelf, the top of a bassinet or a floor lamp, for example.
- **Wall mount:** Includes fittings to drill the camera into the wall.

The most versatile models offer a combination of these mounts, giving you the freedom to place the camera pretty much anywhere you want.

CAMERA VIEWING ANGLE

A shallow viewing angle will only really show what's directly in front of the camera. This isn't a bad option if you're able to position the monitor in front of the baby in such a way that it can't move out of frame.

Cameras with a wider angle will capture more of the room, which is useful if placement is restricted or you need to keep an eye on two or more kids. Some cameras can be controlled remotely with pan and zoom functions so you can keep better track of what's going on.

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

This puts a speaker in the baby monitor so you can communicate with your child from another room. It can help when the baby is restless, but you don't want to risk waking them up by going into the room.

ROOM TEMPERATURE MONITOR

This lets you set an alarm that activates if the baby's room temperature goes above or below the limits you've chosen.

LULLABY MODE

A baby monitor with this feature can play a tune into the room to relax a restless baby or send them gently off to sleep.

NIGHT LIGHT

Some models include a night light for babies who don't like to sleep in the dark.

BATTERY POWER

A back-up option that can keep the camera rolling if the mains die or the camera is accidentally unplugged.

VIDEO RECORDING

You can record footage from the video baby monitor in some models, though this isn't a standard feature. If it's available, then you'll need to buy an SD card to store the footage. Check the instructions and make sure you buy a card that's compatible with the monitor, particularly the class type.

MULTI-CAM SUPPORT

Gives you the option to connect additional cameras to the same account. You can place these in the same room or multiple rooms if you need to monitor two or more kids. Security cameras usually allow this through a single app, within the same manufacturer.

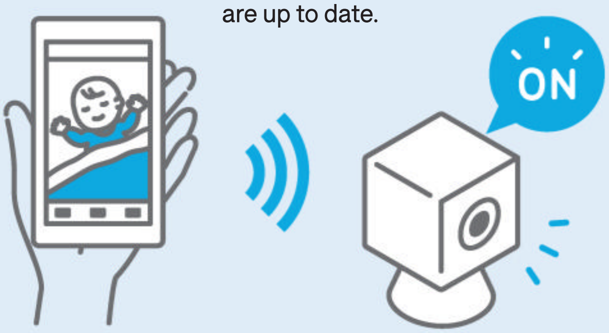
> **Cameras with a wider angle can be useful if you need to keep an eye on two or more kids**

Protecting your privacy

Audio-only baby monitors operating on public transmission frequencies mean that anyone with a receiver (such as a two-way radio, walkie-talkie or another baby monitor) could listen in to conversations you have near the baby monitor. Be aware of this.

If you're using a Wi-Fi-enabled baby monitor, set it up with a secure login password known only to you and separate to your local Wi-Fi password. If you don't change your camera's log-in password from the default (which is often blank), you risk leaving your connection vulnerable to hackers.

Make sure your Wi-Fi monitor is upgraded to the manufacturer's latest firmware version to close potential security loopholes (the instructions should tell you how to do this), and also make sure that any associated smartphone apps are up to date.



				PERFORMANCE										SPECIFICATIONS				
Recommended		Price ($)	Type	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Sound performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall picture score (%)	Daylight picture score (%)	Dim light picture score (%)	Dark picture score (%)	Sound range score (%)	Sound sensitivity and quality score (%)	Interference protection score (%)*	Motion detection	Room temperature monitor	Two-way audio	Night light	Country of origin
✓	**Uniden** BW6101R	399	Camera and carer unit	91	96	81	94	90	90	80	100	88	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**Uniden** BW6101R (app mode)	399	Camera and app	91	96	83	93	90	85	70	100	90	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**VTech** RM5766HD (app mode)	319	Camera and app	91	96	82	94	90	90	80	100	90	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**VTech** RM7764HD (app mode)	389	Camera and app	91	95	85	91	85	70	70	100	83	90	✓	✓	✓		China
✓	**Owlet** Cam 2 OC2A	250	Camera and app	89	95	77	92	80	80	70	100	85	90	✓	✓	✓		China
✓	**CuboAi** Plus Angel Smart Baby Monitor	499	Camera and app	88	95	74	91	85	75	65	100	83	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**iBaby** Care i2	160	Camera and app	88	94	75	94	90	90	80	100	78	90	✓	✓	✓		China
✓	**Lollipop** Smart Baby Camera CABC-LOL03AUPK01	319	Camera and app	88	95	74	93	85	85	75	100	83	90	✓	(A)	✓		Taiwan
✓	**Oricom** Smart HD Skyview OBH650P (app mode)	399	Camera and app	88	91	79	93	90	75	75	100	63	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**Owlet** OC2A Owlet Monitor Duo	650	Camera and app	88	95	77	91	80	75	65	100	83	90	✓	✓	✓		(C)
✓	**VTech** BM2800	99	Camera and carer unit	88	93	81	87	60	55	55	100	90	90		✓	✓		China
✓	**VTech** RM5766HD	319	Camera and carer unit	88	91	77	94	90	90	80	100	83	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**Dormi** Baby Monitor for Android (App)	9	App only	87	96	77	85	70	75	5	100	90	90	✓		✓	(B)	ns
✓	**iBaby** Care i6	299	Camera and app	87	92	74	92	80	80	70	100	68	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**Oricom** OBH36T Nursery Pal Premium (App)	225	Camera and app	87	94	75	90	80	70	60	100	80	90	✓	✓	✓		China
✓	**Oricom** Smart HD Dual Camera (OBHDUAL)	329	Camera and app	87	90	77	92	80	80	70	100	58	90	✓	✓	✓		China
✓	**Arjona** Software BabyCam	3	App only	86	87	82	87	85	85	5	100	60	90			✓	(B)	ns
✓	**Maxi-Cosi** Connected Home Bundle	499	Camera and app	86	93	70	94	90	90	80	100	75	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**Oricom** OBH500 Nursery Pal (App)	349	Camera and app	86	89	76	93	90	80	80	100	63	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
✓	**VTech** RM7764HD	389	Camera and carer unit	86	85	87	86	85	70	70	90	75	90	✓	✓	✓		China
✓	**TappyTaps** Baby Monitor 3G	9	App only	85	87	79	87	85	80	5	100	45	90			✓	(B)	ns
	Uniden Smart Baby Monitor BW140R	150	Camera and app	84	86	72	92	80	75	80	100	70	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
	Uniden Smart Baby Monitor BW150R	180	Camera and app	82	83	70	91	75	70	75	100	75	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
	Vava VA-IH006 Baby Monitor	259	Camera and carer unit	82	81	81	84	75	65	55	90	80	90		✓	✓		China
	VTech BM3350N	190	Camera and carer unit	82	81	84	81	55	50	50	90	78	90		✓	✓	✓	China
	MobiCam 70196-SK Pan and Tilt	41	Camera and app	81	77	74	93	90	80	70	100	60	90	✓		✓		ns
	Vigi Limited Cloud Baby Monitor	8	App only	81	82	80	81	40	50	5	100	63	90	✓		✓	(B)	ns
	DGTEC DG163BMBL Smart Baby Monitor	99	Camera and app	78	67	78	91	80	70	70	100	45	90	✓	✓	✓	✓	China
	VTech BM3800	159	Camera and carer unit	77	82	86	61	60	50	50	90	83	90		✓	✓	✓	China
	Oricom OBH500 Nursery Pal	300	Camera and carer unit	76	66	78	86	80	70	70	90	58	90		✓	✓	✓	China
	Oricom OBH36T Nursery Pal	349	Camera and carer unit	74	62	74	90	80	70	60	60	58	90		✓	✓		China

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend models that score 85% and above. **Price** recommended retail price as of November 2024. **CHOICE Expert Rating** for audio/video products is made up of picture performance (30%), sound performance (40%) and ease of use (30%). Performance results for app-only baby monitors are based on the smartphone used for testing. * Immunity from interference for sound by a microwave oven or digital cordless phone. **(A)** Optional extra. **(B)** Uses light on smartphone. **(C)** China/Thailand. **ns** Not stated. All models in this table have both audio and video capabilities. Some product names have been condensed to fit. For full names, visit choice.com.au. ■

IMAGE: GETTY

Watch dog

Need to keep tabs on your furry friend while you're out of the house? **Kim Gilmour** helps you choose the right pet camera

If you have an anxious pet, a pet camera could give you peace of mind when you're away from home. Or perhaps you're simply curious to know what they get up to when you're not looking! Pet cameras connect to an app on your smartphone, so you can log in and observe your pet from afar to make sure they're happy and safe.

Owners of anxious dogs might be reassured by models with two-way audio that alert you to any distressed barks and let you talk to your pet to calm them down. People worried about their pet being bored may enjoy a model that lets you throw treats toward them, and some models even have laser pointers for a game of chase!

Some pet cameras do require you to pay for an additional subscription on top of the unit's purchase price, while others are just a one-off cost. Here we outline how to choose the model that's right for you.

Many models have special alerts for barking (or in some cases, "excessive meowing")

Why not just use a security camera or baby monitor?

If you just want to keep an eye on what your pet gets up to while you're away, a security camera or baby monitor could very well do the job. These generally let you view a livestream of your home, use two-way audio, and alert you when motion is detected. So if all you want to do is see, hear and talk to your pet throughout the day, a security camera or baby monitor with those features might do the trick (see our baby monitor review on page 50 – all models in the table have two-way audio).

NEED TO KNOW

- Most pet cameras let you watch, interact with, and treat/feed your pet. Many will also alert you to certain events like barking.
- Several CHOICE trialists and an expert tester looked at three treat-dispensing pet cameras and one smart pet feeder.

If you already have a security camera in the area where your pet spends a lot of its time, you could certainly use it for pet monitoring. Some models even have motion detectors that can differentiate between humans and animals (although you may have to pay extra for that feature).

The most important difference between pet cameras and baby or security cameras is the inclusion of some pet-specific features you may find handy.

Firstly, all four of the models we looked at have the ability to dispense food for your pet – three throw treats for entertainment and reassurance, while one model dispenses regular pet food.

Secondly, many models have special alerts for barking (or in some cases, “excessive meowing”), and one model we looked at even claims to be able to alert you if your pet has vomited (these features may require a subscription).

Features to look for

STORAGE

Pet cameras generally ping your phone when your pet is in view, so you can view a real-time livestream of them in action.

Some models capture the footage for later viewing, while cheaper models might let you save real-time footage when you’re logged on to the camera. Footage will be saved onto the unit via a built-in memory card, which means you’ll need to regularly transfer it elsewhere to free up storage if you want to keep the footage. Some will upload content to a cloud account (usually subscription-based) and hold it for a certain amount of time before it gets deleted.

EXTRA FEATURES (WITH EXTRA COST)

Some subscription-based services will provide extra features such as Furbo Nanny’s “vomit alert”, or the ability to ask questions in a virtual chat, such as when the pet was last at its feeding bowl or what certain behaviour might mean. Smoke, fire or broken glass might also trigger alerts.

Petcube models require a subscription to access locked or additional-tier features that may be “nice-to-haves”, such as barking alerts, an online vet chat service, or the ability to store videos of your pet in the cloud. In those cases, look for a free trial and cancel before it expires if you don’t want to commit.

PRIVACY AND SECURITY

If you’re worried about sensitive data being kept in the cloud, make sure the services encrypt it, or choose a model that instead stores data on the camera.

As with smart devices generally, you’ll have to set up an account that will require some personal information (such as your name, email address or payment methods). Furbo’s privacy policy states it “may also collect video and audio information of individuals when they pass in front of the camera or speak when the Furbo Camera is on”.

VIDEO QUALITY

Look for pet cameras with 1080p full HD video quality. The models we tested all have this level of detail and we rated the videos excellent, with smooth movement. Some units have infrared night vision capabilities, which is handy, and detail was good on the models we checked.

MULTIPLE ACCOUNTS

Some units allow several logins from more than one device, and/or the ability to share footage with other people.

LASER POINTERS

Some pet cameras have laser pointers that you can activate remotely, so cats can play chase via a dot on the floor.

CAT VS DOG SPECIFIC

Most pet cameras are designed to be used for both cats and dogs, but Furbo has two models, virtually the same in every way except the cat one has a feather wand for them to bat.

Pet camera reviews

We looked at four pet cameras to see how they performed. All models let you dispense treats or food, hear and talk to your pet and view a livestream. Many have additional features that can only be accessed if you pay for a subscription, such as bark alerts and the option to download videos.

HOW WE TEST

Our expert tester Matthew Tung looked at the cameras’ ease of use (including camera/app set-up and general use). He also assessed video quality in daylight, dim light and darkness, looking for excellent depth, contrast and field of view. Finally, he rated sound quality and sensitivity for each camera.

We also got a panel of CHOICE staff, all pet owners, to test the cameras in their own homes for a real-life experience and report back after using it for several days. ▶

All four of the models we looked at have the ability to dispense food for your pet

IMAGES: GETTY

Arlec Smart Pet Feeder with Camera PFC002HA

Cost: $149
Field of view: Not stated (doesn't rotate)
Type: Pet feeder
Bark alert: No

PROS:
- Dispenses dry food in 10–15g portions (5L total capacity)
- Keeps record of when food is dispensed and how much
- Alerts when food is running low
- Bowl easy to clean

CONS:
- No automatic video storage
- Poor set-up instructions
- Both trialists had difficulty pairing unit with app
- App not intuitive to use
- Need to manually save videos and screenshots
- Hopper difficult to clean and may attract ants
- No alerts for barking
- Fish-eye lens caused some distortion

Eufy Dog Camera D605

Cost: $500
Field of view: 170° but can rotate up to 270° to track and follow your pet
Type: Treat dispensing
Bark alert: Yes

PROS:
- Good audio and video
- Easy to clean
- No subscription costs to access features
- 16GB local storage
- Automatically records snippets of activity (like barking or motion)
- Flicks treats at varying distances

CONS:
- Lots of alerts as the camera fails to distinguish between human and animal activity
- The option to set a "pet activity zone" on the app to restrict notifications to movements in that area didn't work as expected for our trialist
- Fish-eye lens distorts objects that are close or far away
- One trialist found some features glitchy and the instructions insufficient

Furbo 360° Dog Camera plus Dog Nanny

Cost: $149 plus $9.99 monthly subscription
Field of view: 360°
Type: Treat dispensing
Bark alert: Yes

PROS:
- Easy to set up
- App easy to use
- Alerts for "abnormal or concerning behaviour such as chewing, continuous howling, excessive weeing and pooing, vomiting, continuous barking/meowing, and home emergencies (for example, breaking glass, fire alarms or human movement)
- Dispenses treats
- Cloud-based storage
- Excellent video quality in all lighting

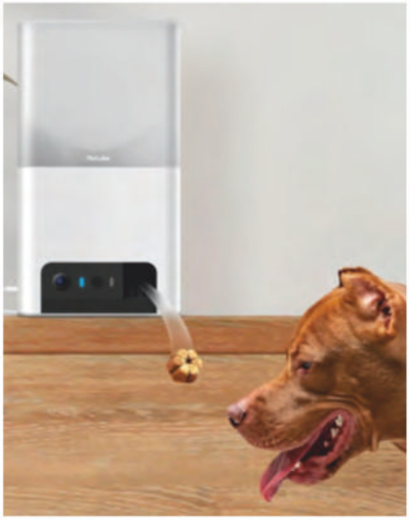
CONS:
- Noises must be over 65dB to trigger a noise alert (could also be seen as a positive)
- Monthly subscription to access all features (though the $359 standalone camera model has basic features like barking alerts)

Petcube Bites 2 Lite BL10US

Cost: $249 plus $8.49 per month for Optimal plan (or $65.88/year if paid annually)
Field of view: 160° (doesn't rotate)
Type: Treat dispensing
Bark alert: Yes (subscription-only)

PROS:
- Easy to set up
- App is easy to use
- Dispenses treats
- Easy to clean
- Good video quality
- Alerts for barking
- Can download videos
- Cloud storage available

CONS:
- Subscription to access alerts, storage and smart features
- One trialist found the video laggy – there's no option to lower the bandwidth of the video
- Noises must be over 55dB to trigger a noise alert (could also be seen as a positive). ■



Budget barbie

How much do you need to spend to get a good barbecue? **Alice Richard** grills our expert and gets some good news

If the cost of living has curtailed some of your leisure activities, you're probably spending more time at home. Buying a few key appliances can take the sting out of missing out: a decent coffee machine to replace barista-made brews, an air fryer so you can cook your own top-notch fish and chips, and a barbecue so you can socialise at home instead of going out.

But since you're on a budget, does that mean you need to settle for a substandard model just to save money? Not necessarily.

While many of the best-scoring barbies from our tests are at the upper end of the market, there are also plenty of more affordable models. You can pick up a barbecue that's recommended by our experts for $600 or less.

We explain how to make your money go further when you're buying – and using – a barbecue.

> **"Build quality is important in a barbecue because they are most likely stored outdoors in the elements"**

Are cheap barbecues any good?

Can you pick up a good barbecue on the cheap? Maybe, but it's important to choose wisely, says CHOICE kitchen expert Fiona Mair.

"As a general rule, we find that cheaper barbecues often aren't made from quality materials, and aren't well constructed," she says.

"Build quality is important in a barbecue because they are most likely stored outdoors in the elements, so they need to withstand Australia's harsh climate. But it is possible to find a decent barbecue at a decent price if you do your research."

If you only have the funds for a budget barbie but you still want to get your grill on, Mair has a few pointers that'll help your barbecue last the distance.

"If you clean your barbecue each time you use it, it can really extend the lifespan of the grill plates and keep other parts in good condition," she says.

"And if you have room, store it undercover in between uses – especially over winter when you most likely won't be using it often or at all."

How to make your money go further

Don't be tempted to buy the biggest barbecue your money can buy – go for quality over quantity. ▶

IMAGE: GETTY

"Bigger doesn't always mean better: sometimes the grill plates on larger barbecues, particularly if they're cheaper ones, don't heat evenly, so you'll be left with cold spots and your food won't all finish cooking at the same time," says Mair.

"Our tests often show that smaller hooded barbecues are more efficient at cooking. If you choose wisely, you can get more bang for your buck with a smaller, better quality barbecue than a big one."

And it's worth thinking outside the box: you don't necessarily have to buy a traditional gas barbecue.

"Some of the charcoal and electric barbecues we test deliver great results. They're generally cheaper than gas barbecues and, as an added bonus, they're often more compact and portable."

What size barbecue do you need?

When it comes time to buy a new barbecue, consider the size of your entertaining area, as well as how many people you're likely to most often be barbecuing for.

There are three size categories, but a few barbecues have functions and features that can cross over between the categories.

TRAVEL BBQ

Small, lightweight and mobile, travel barbecues are designed to be easily transported to a campsite, beach or park. They're just big enough for home use too, though your guests may need to be patient as they can only cook for a couple of people at a time.

They typically only have one burner or charcoal compartment. Many can accommodate a small propane gas bottle, and may have travel-friendly features such as locking lids, collapsible trolleys and wheels.

They're generally available in LPG, propane, or charcoal*. Some are suitable for natural gas.

BALCONY (OR PORTABLE) BBQ

These small to medium-sized barbecues are perfect for smaller balconies. Though larger than travel barbecues, they're still appropriate for camping and easy to move around so you can free up the balcony as needed.

They bridge the gap between travel barbecues and something a bit more permanent for your backyard. They typically have two to three burners and can accommodate cooking for around four to six people.

Most models come with a detachable trolley; you'll need bench space for ones that don't. However, they generally have side handles, so they're easy to lift and move around. Some offer all the features of larger barbecues, such as a hood, chargrill plate, solid hotplate and foldable side tables. As an added bonus, they often come mostly pre-assembled – just unpack and place on a trolley or bench.

They're available in charcoal*, LPG, electricity or propane.

BACKYARD BBQ

The big players of the barbecue world have a lot of surface area to cook on, usually with four or more burners. This make them great for entertaining and big family dinners, and the extra space gives you enough room to try offset cooking or basic smoking using a smoke box.

As you can imagine, you'll need ample space to accommodate them. They often have a large trolley with big side tables, a storage cupboard and a side burner, which takes up extra space.

Though technically mobile, they're hard to move about. The lids can also be relatively heavy to open and close.

Backyard barbecues may also be tricky and time-consuming to put together. Some retailers can assemble and deliver them for a fee.

They're available in all fuel types: charcoal*, LPG, natural gas, electricity or propane.

* Charcoal is not suitable for use on balconies.

PETER ZALUZNY

			COSTS		PERFORMANCE										SPECIFICATIONS			
Recommended		Fuel type	Price ($)	Running cost ($)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Cooking performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Evenness score (%)	Evenness – high fat score (%)	Evenness – heat recovery score (%)	Evenness – pita bread score (%)	Low temperature score (%)	Roasting score (%)	Cleaning score (%)	Hot plate	Side burner	Weight if portable (kg)	Total cooking area (m2)
TRAVEL																		
✓	**STC** Japanese Korean Ceramic Hibachi BBQ Table Grill	C	110	1381	86	92	76	85	90	nt	nt	100	na	80			9.4	0.10
✓	**Everdure by Heston Blumenthal** Cube	C	229	812	81	88	70	85	90	nt	nt	na	na	70			7.3	0.07
	Weber Traveler Compact Portable Gas Barbecue (LPG)	Pr/L	599	242	78	82	71	85	80	60	80	80	na	70			18	0.17
	Traeger Ranger Pellet Grill TFT18KLD	P	900	356	73	91	46	95	90	nt	nt	95	85	50	✓		27	0.12
BALCONY (A)																		
✓	**Weber** Baby Q Premium Q1200N	L	399	259	83	90	73	90	90	nt	90	100	80	70	(B)		11	0.17
✓	**Weber** Lumin	E	649	80	83	93	69	90	100	80	90	90	na	70			16.5	0.16
✓	**Breville** The AdjustaGrill™ & Sear LGR350	E	190	44	82	90	70	80	100	70	100	90	na	60	✓		4.4	0.07
✓	**Weber** Q Q2000N	L	539	339	82	89	72	90	100	nt	80	80	85	70	(B)		14.5	0.23
✓	**Everdure by Heston Blumenthal** Force	L	1099	358	80	84	73	85	90	nt	nt	70	90	80	✓		ns	0.24
✓	**Cuisinart** Griddler & Deep Pan GR-5XA (BBQ mode)	E	269	109	79	87	68	80	90	nt	nt	90	na	60	✓		5.4	0.13
✓	**Breville** The Smart Grill BGR840BSS	E	499	nt	78	83	70	85	85	nt	nt	80	na	60	✓		8.8	0.14
✓	**Weber** Pulse 2000	E	759	172	78	81	73	80	85	nt	nt	85	75	70	(B)		19.6	0.19
✓	**DeLonghi** MultiGrill 1100 CGH1112DP (BBQ mode)	E	349	90	76	78	73	80	80	nt	nt	75	na	60	✓		7.3	0.16
	Ziegler & Brown Ziggy Classic Triple Grill ZG3GCPLUS	L	1048	424	76	79	71	90	60	80	70	90	75	70	(B)		ns	0.30
	Masport X-Grill 553350	L	999	443	75	81	65	70	90	nt	90	65	100	65	✓		34	0.30
	Beefeater BB18226 Bugg Portable BBQ	L	599	320	74	83	60	75	80	nt	nt	90	85	55	✓		ns	0.22
BACKYARD																		
✓	**Weber** Spirit II E310 LPG	L	999	505	87	98	71	90	100	nt	nt	100	100	70	✓		na	0.36
✓	**Weber** Q+ Premium Q2800N+	L	599	360	86	95	73	90	100	nt	80	90	100	70	(B)		17	0.23
✓	**Weber** Slate Premium Griddle 30”	L	1399	633	84	88	77	100	85	100	90	80	na	70	✓		na	0.36
✓	**Everdure by Heston Blumenthal** Fusion BBQ	E/C	1099	1405	82	90	70	95	90	nt	nt	90	85	75			na	0.16
✓	**Everdure by Heston Blumenthal** HBG3O Furnace	L	1399	465	82	88	72	65	85	nt	nt	100	100	80	✓		na	0.30
✓	**Everdure by Heston Blumenthal** Hub	E/C	1999	2839	82	88	73	85	95	nt	nt	na	85	75			na	0.33
✓	**Weber** Family Q+ Premium Q3200N+	L	899	459	82	88	73	90	90	nt	80	70	100	70	(B)		na	0.28
✓	**Weber** Spirit EX-335 Smart Barbecue (LPG)	L	1599	289	80	83	76	75	85	nt	nt	85	85	75	✓	✓	na	0.42
	Everdure Hayman Series E4TB (Black)	L	899	931	79	83	72	65	100	nt	nt	85	80	70	✓	✓	na	0.29
	Ziegler & Brown Turbo Classic 2 Burner	L	1879	488	79	86	69	75	90	nt	nt	100	80	65	✓	✓	na	0.24
	Everdure by Heston Blumenthal 4K HBCE4KG	C	2799	1690	74	83	60	80	90	nt	nt	85	75	70			na	0.16
	Ziegler & Brown Turbo Classic 4 Burner	L	2499	925	74	75	72	70	75	nt	nt	80	75	65	✓	✓	na	0.32
	Beefeater 1600 Series Four Burner BBQ with Trolley BMG1641DA	L	1899	978	73	75	70	100	55	100	70	60	85	65	✓	✓	na	0.35

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend models with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 80% and above (or 70% and above for electric). **Fuel type C** Charcoal, **E** Electric, **L** LPG, **P** Pellets, **Pr** Propane. **Price** RRP as of November 2024. **Running cost** Based on using the barbecue three times a week for 30 minutes over six months of the year, at an average cost of $4.12/kg of LPG gas (or 40c/kWh for electric models). **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of cooking performance (60%) and ease of use (40%). **Evenness – heat recovery score** A large, 2cm rump steak is cooked on the centre of a hotplate (or chargrill if the BBQ doesn't have a hotplate). We look for how well the steak responds when turning over, and if the BBQ can maintain enough heat to evenly brown both sides. **Evenness – pita bread score** We cover the hotplate and grill with pita bread to see if any areas aren't heated enough, or get too hot and burn the bread. **(A)** Balcony models in this table are also portable. **(B)** Optional extra. **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. **nt** Not tested. ■

IMAGES: GETTY | WEBER | EVERDURE | BARBEQUESGALORE.COM.AU

Throwing shapes

If you've got hedges to trim, you'll need the right tool for the job. **Kim Gilmour** and **Chris Barnes** help you choose

Hedges can look spectacular when they're all neat and tidy, but they do require a fair amount of maintenance to keep them looking schmick. And with the mixture of heights, odd angles, a heavy weight and very sharp blades, hedge trimming can be a potentially dangerous experience, so you'll need to make a note of safety features when you're shopping for one.

> **Hedge trimmers with a constant power source will generally perform better**

Types of hedge trimmer

You will see from our results that we only recommend one model, and it's the only electric (corded) model in the test. Although battery-powered models might be fine for most typical gardens, hedge trimmers with a constant power source will generally perform better.

BATTERY POWER

Battery hedge trimmers are great for most households and many brands have batteries that are compatible with other power or garden tools. They're light, relatively quiet and you can always have a spare battery on hand if your power depletes. However, some models can feel underpowered when cutting thick branches, and a greater load will deplete the battery faster.

Battery hedge trimmers generally run at full power, so their cutting performance should stay the same until the battery runs out and the trimmer shuts off.

ELECTRIC

Electric (AC) hedge trimmers are light and handy, and there's the advantage of a constant power source (unless there's a power outage, of course). Make sure your extension cord reaches your power point and it meets the correct requirements for outdoor use (check the manual). If your hedge is more than 30m from your house, these are not suitable, as extension leads won't reach that far. Take care when un-snagging cords from ladders or foliage.

PETROL

Petrol models are usually fuelled by two-stroke engines that require a lubricant and petrol mix (though four-stroke engines are also available). They're a good option for professionals as well as homeowners with tough hedges to maintain as they tend to be more powerful than models with a battery-powered engine.

While good for thicker branches and large amounts of hedging (due to their longer runtime), they can be noisier, more polluting (with fumes near your face) and heavier than electric or battery types.

How much should I pay for a hedge trimmer?

Electric and cordless hedge trimmers range from around $139 to $599 plus a battery pack, which could add up to $200 for some models – though the battery may be interchangeable with other garden or power tools.

Petrol models can also be found in this price range, but for a heavy-duty petrol model you should expect to pay a fair bit more. (Note: CHOICE no longer reviews petrol models.)

What to consider

WEIGHT

The battery hedge trimmers we tested can weigh from 2.2–4.7kg. The balance of the trimmer is also important, so try one out in the store or borrow one from a friend to see how it feels.

TEETH GAP

Will you need to cut through thick branches or do simple trimming of leaves? If there is significant cutting involved you'll need a more powerful model. Generally, models with larger tooth gaps (at least 2cm) are more suitable for heavy-duty hedging.

BLADES

Can be laser-cut for increased accuracy and longevity.

WRAP-AROUND FRONT HANDLE

A loop-shaped handle makes it easier to handle the tool when trimming horizontally, vertically or at an angle. Rear handles may also rotate for vertical or horizontal trimming.

SAFETY

A hand guard will help prevent debris being thrown back towards the user. A good safety feature to look for is a safety switch on both handles, so the trimmer won't start or run unless both handles are gripped. This keeps your hands out of harm's way.

TIP PROTECTOR

This is located at the end of the cutting head, and prevents the blades from damage in case you accidentally hit a hard surface while trimming (like the wall or ground).

LENGTH

The cutting length can vary from about 40–75cm. Most of the models we test are around 50cm which is good for most general jobs. Longer hedge trimmers with poles (which can be telescopic or fixed) are suitable for tall hedges and will give you extra reach.

Maintenance

After each use, clean off debris from the blades with a dry brush and use a spray lubricant. Over time, the blades will become blunt and won't cut as effectively. Some brands may have blades that can be removed and sharpened either professionally (contact your local dealer) or at home. But very cheap models may not have serviceable parts.

				PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS							
Recommended		Price ($)	Type	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Noise at user's position (dBA)	Noise at 7.5m (dBA)	Weight (kg)	Blade length (cm)	Gap between teeth (cm)	Battery voltage (V)	Claimed battery charging time (min)	Cutting head can be rotated	Origin	Warranty (years)
✓	**Stihl** HSE 61 (A)	329	E	83	90	75	90	68	4.2	50	2.2	na	na	✓	Germany	ns
	Husqvarna Aspire H50-P4A	269	B	76	80	72	88	69	3.1	50	3.1	18	60		China (body, charger); Hungary (battery)	5
	Ego HT2601E Power+	529	B	74	80	68	88	68	4.6	66	3.8	56	50	✓	China	5
	Makita LXT DUH507CT	369	B	74	70	77	75	57	3.0	50	2.8	18	110		China (body, charger); Vietnam (battery)	5
	Stihl HSA 56 AK System	429	B	74	80	67	84	64	3.7	45	2.3	36	95		Austria	2
	Stihl HSA 66	598	B	74	80	67	88	63	4.7	50	3.0	36	60		Austria	ns
	Victa 1697418	139	B	74	70	78	77	58	2.6	51	2.5	18	80		China	5
	Ryobi ONE+ RHT1840Li20	199	B	73	70	75	83	64	2.8	40	2.2	18	80		Vietnam (body, battery); China (charger)	6
	AEG A18FHTR14 Fusion Brushless	429	B	72	70	73	84	63	3.8	55	3.8	18	ns	✓	Vietnam (body); China (charger, battery)	6
	Black + Decker BCHTS3625L1 Power Command	349	B	69	70	67	84	66	3.3	55	3.0	36	115		China	2
	Black + Decker GTC1845L20-XE	189	B	66	60	72	86	65	2.6	45	1.8	18	50		China	2
	Ozito PXCHTK-218 Power Xchange Cordless Kit	119	B	62	50	73	84	65	2.3	46	1.9	18	150		China	5
	DeWalt DCMHT563P1 XR	299	B	60	50	70	82	63	3.6	55	3.3	18	75		China	3

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend models with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 80%. All the battery models we tested score less than 80%, but some are still worth considering. **Price** Includes battery, if there is one. **Type E** Electric, **B** Battery. **CHOICE Expert Rating** consists of performance (50%) and ease of use (50%). **(A)** Tested in 2016. **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. ■

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*Indicates a correction or clarification (see Checkout).

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A	Praises, no criticism
B	Some praise, no criticism
C	Praises, some criticism
D	Criticism, some praise
F	Criticisms

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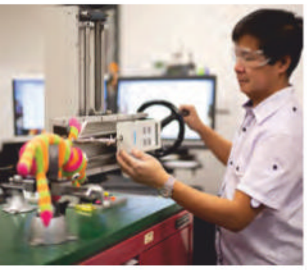

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Home, health & finances in retirement

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Big chill

Large household? Super-size your fridge

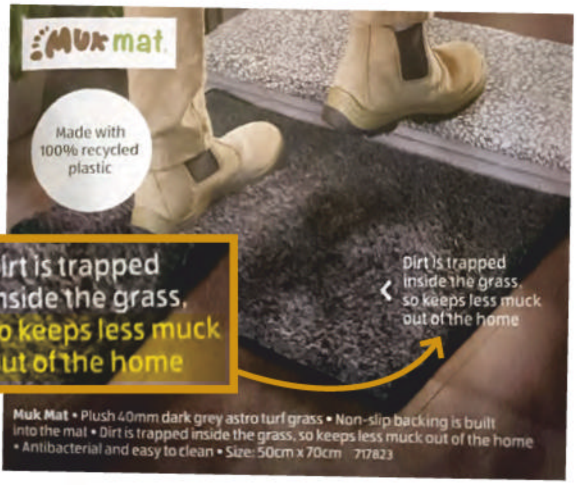
Ceiling fans

How to choose the right model for any room

Plus **Fitness trackers, dishwashers, stain removers & more**

MORE OR LESS?

This ad is really mucking with our minds.



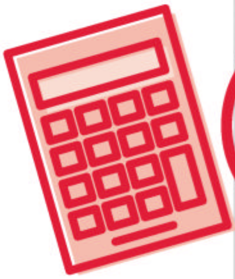
Dirt is trapped inside the grass, so keeps less muck out of the home

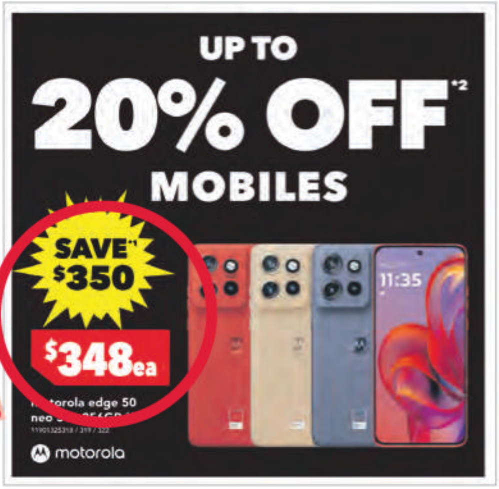
Dirt is trapped inside the grass, so keeps less muck out of the home

Muk Mat • Plush 40mm dark grey astro turf grass • Non-slip backing is built into the mat • Dirt is trapped inside the grass, so keeps less muck out of the home • Antibacterial and easy to clean • Size: 50cm x 70cm 717823

HOLD THE PHONE

Talk about underselling a bargain.





UP TO

20% OFF*2

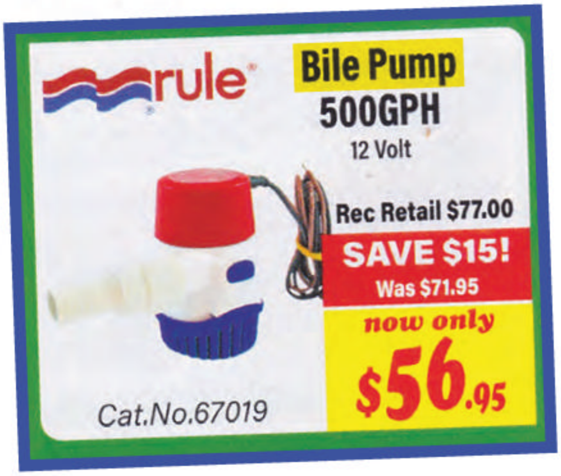
MOBILES

SAVE* $350

$348ea

torola edge 50
neo

motorola



rule

Bile Pump
500GPH
12 Volt

Rec Retail $77.00

SAVE $15!

Was $71.95

now only

$56.95

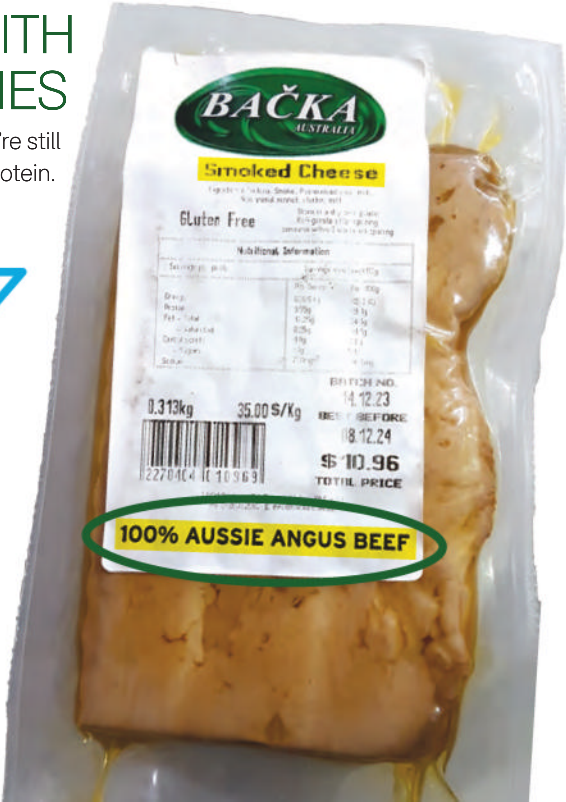
Cat.No.67019

SPELLS TROUBLE

This ad was spotted by two readers. Eeeew!

OFF WITH THE DAIRIES

Either way, you're still getting protein.



BAČKA
AUSTRALIA

Smoked Cheese

Gluten Free

Nutritional Information

BATCH NO. 14.12.23

0.313kg 35.00 $/Kg BEST BEFORE 08.12.24

$ 10.96
TOTAL PRICE

100% AUSSIE ANGUS BEEF

HARD WORD

Our long-serving rogues' gallery of dodgy ads, toe-curling typos and misadventures in marketing, as sent in by you – our tickled, angered and bewildered readers. And thanks to the timeless shonkiness of so much advertising, you're always spoilt for choice – so keep 'em coming. Email high-quality unedited photos to hardword@choice.com.au.

This month, thanks go to Roger Anderson (Hold the phone), Jim Clavarino and Will Howard (Spells trouble), M. Saunders (More or less?) and Brian Wolff (Off with the dairies).

Compiled by Daniel Wynne

FEBRUARY 2025
ISSN 0009 496X. Print post approved 100000729. Wholly printed in Australia by IVE Group, 83 Derby Street, Silverwater, NSW 2128, in 2025 for the publisher, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.